

25¢

JULY

BLACK MASK



LEAVE KILLINGS TO THE COPS

A JOHNNY FORD
NOVELETTE

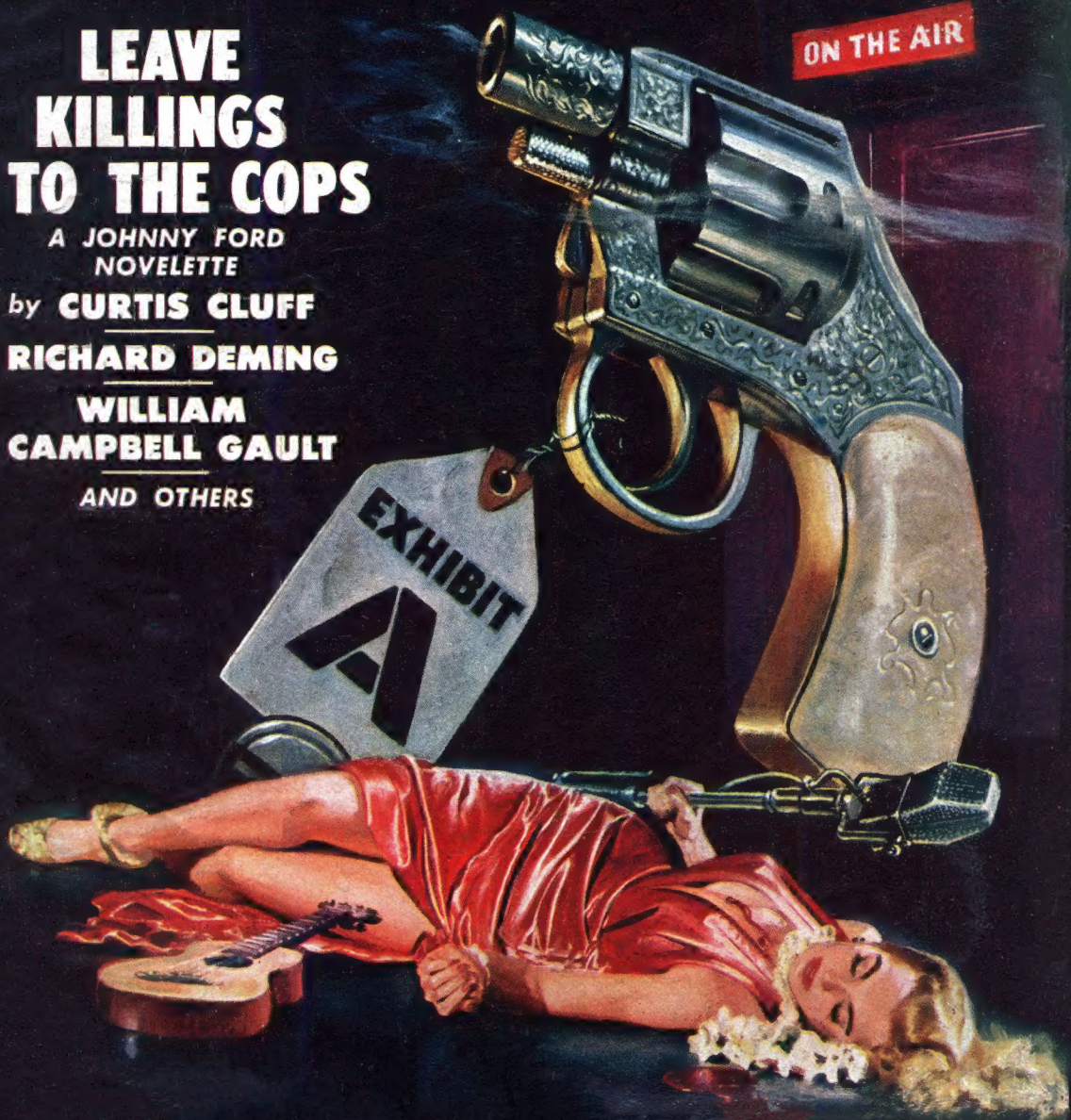
by **CURTIS CLUFF**

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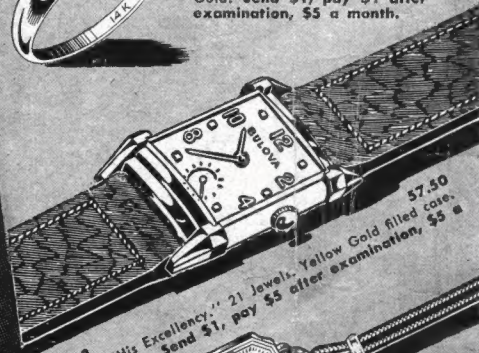


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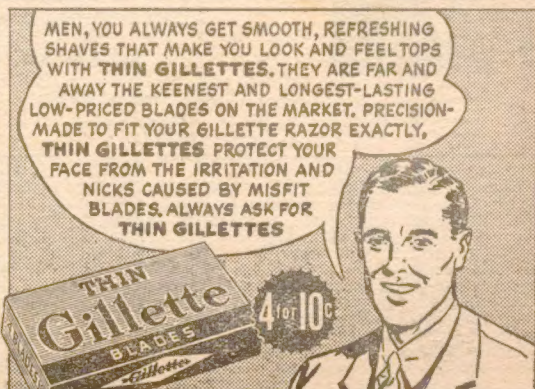
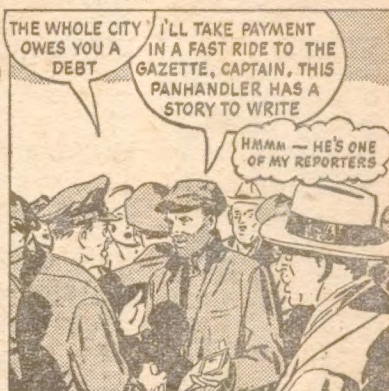
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BLACK MASK

VOL. XXXI, No. 4

JULY, 1948

K. S. WHITE, Editor

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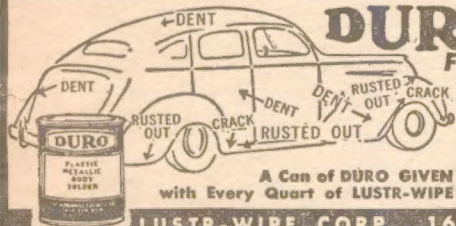
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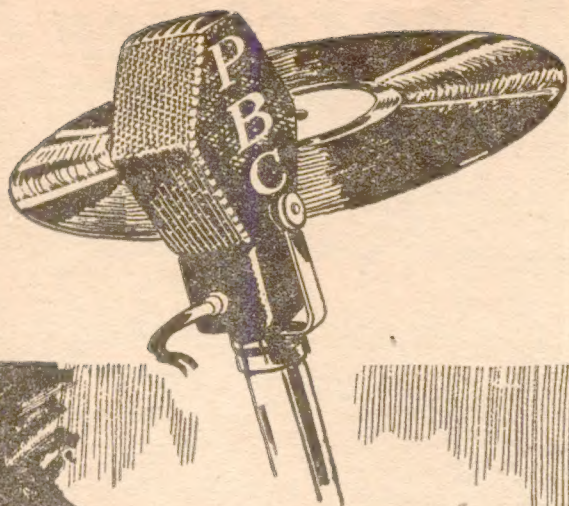
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LEAVE

A
Johnny Ford
Novelette



KILLINGS TO THE COPS

By CURTIS CLUFF

Murder was Johnny Ford's business and he knew it was nothing to fool around with. Amateurs always get burned if they attempt to correct the script of a slay sequence.



THE door to the inner office was ajar though I remembered closing it when I went out. I had come in quietly out of habit and there was no sound from inside the office. I crossed the anteroom and pushed the door wide.

The lean, tall man was seated at my desk. His sparse gray hair was precisely combed, giving his quiet face an old-fashioned, daguerreotype look. His tropical weight suit was gray as was the hat on the corner of the desk. Both looked expensive. His head inclined over my portable chessboard on the desk blotter. A slender thumb and forefinger tugged at an ear lobe and his lips were pursed slightly.

"Good afternoon."

He looked up, the contemplative expression still on his face. His eyes were blue and his mouth firm and square. "Are you Mr. Ford?"

I nodded, hung my dark coconut straw on the rack, admired its blue pheasant lei band for the hundredth time and turned back toward the desk. He rose from my chair without apology, moved around the desk and sat in the customer's chair. I sat down, toed out a bottom drawer, propped my feet on it and nodded toward the chessboard. "What do you think of it?"

He looked at the board. "It is an open-

The gun angled down and she was still pulling the trigger convulsively.

ing that has its merits," he said thoughtfully. "I'm not surprised to find a man in your profession studying it."

"You'll have to spell that out."

"The Sicilian Defense is generally conceded to be an excellent gambit for a strong player who is prepared to take risks to force a win." He was mildly pleased with himself.

I picked up the board, leaving the men pegged in their positions, and placed it in the top drawer of the desk. "What did you want to see me about, Mr—?"

"Robert Merriam," he supplied.

I examined him with new interest. It is not often that I can look across my desk at six million dollars.

MERRIAM tilted his head at me. "Have you ever heard of the Paradise Broadcasting Company?"

"That's the radio station about ten blocks from here, isn't it?"

Merriam nodded. "I acquired it a few years ago along with a number of other properties. I didn't want to own a radio station but I was forced to take it in order to avoid losing quite a large sum of money." He paused and arranged his words.

"I know absolutely nothing about radio and despise the things but in my opinion the station is not making as much money as it should. I have checked our rates against those offered by other local stations and ours are in line with theirs. I have forced myself to listen to the radio for hours on end to compare the quality of our programs with others. Frankly, they are terrible but so are those of the other stations. And finally, I am satisfied that we carry as much advertising as the other stations." He shook his head. "The books balance but I simply sense that something is wrong."

"Have you considered having the books audited privately?"

"A very good local firm has been auditing the books semiannually since I acquired the station. The firm is above reproach and they apparently haven't noticed anything out of the way. In spite of that, I have the feeling that everything is not as it should be."

"Do you suspect anything or anybody in particular? The station manager, for instance?"

"Watson Hardy is quite mad, as most radio people are, but he seems to be honest. He has the virus of radio in his blood, not money."

"What about the sales manager?"

Merriam's eyes told me this was the question I was supposed to ask. "The station doesn't have a sales manager at present. Good ones are hard to get. Hardy has been acting as general overseer and he has a young announcer, rather a virtuoso I hear, handling a good bit of the selling end. While Mr. Weir doesn't actually run the sales force, he comes as close to being in charge as anybody with the exception of Hardy. I'm told he has a flair for selling as he does for broadcasting. He seems to be very clever and I've begun to wonder about him."

"Why?"

"Perhaps you will think I'm making a mountain out of a molehill—but here you have a young man who started at the bottom of the announcer's list less than a year ago and in that space of time has risen to a position second only to Hardy in control of the station's affairs. During my infrequent visits to the studio I always make it a point to chat informally with the employees who happen to be on duty. Not once in the past year, Mr. Ford, has any employee evidenced any signs of either envy or admiration or respect for Frank Weir. Rather an odd situation, don't you think, considering his rapid rise?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes a pat on the

head isn't enough to make an employee open up with his life story."

Merriam smiled. "Every successful businessman must be something of an amateur psychologist. To me, this lack of emotion on the part of Weir's fellow workers indicates dislike—dislike based on something more than mere envy. Aside from Weir's above-average ability at the microphone and his obvious sales ability, there must be personal traits that do not call for either envy or admiring imitation from the rest of the staff."

"Is Weir Island-born?"

"No. He arrived in Honolulu about a year ago."

"You want me to get in touch with a mainland agency and check into his background?"

"I'm not particularly interested in that," Merriam said slowly. "What I want is a complete report on his present activities—who his companions are, how much money he spends—that sort of thing. I'd like to know the background of the people he sees and what sort of pastimes he engages in."

"What does Weir look like?"

"Rather dark complexion, very dark hair, blue eyes."

"Tall or short?"

"Tall, about your height."

"Age?"

"About thirty-five."

"Heavy, medium-build, slender?"

"On the heavy side."

"How much time are you allowing me?"

"Enough to make a complete report," he smiled, "and I want the report to point out what lines your investigation has followed in order that I may be certain that the—research—has been complete."

"Any special angle you'd like me to begin on?"

"I leave that entirely in your hands."

He pulled out his wallet. "There is the question of fees and you will want a retainer."

"Twenty-five a day and expenses. A hundred retainer."

He laid two crisp fifties on the desk, stood up and offered his hand. "I think we understand each other, Mr. Ford."

I wasn't so sure but I nodded anyway.

He paused in the doorway. "You understand, Mr. Ford, when I say I want to know who his acquaintances are, and something about them, I mean everybody he sees—everybody." He turned and walked through the anteroom and let himself out quietly.

I put the two bills in my wallet, sat down and stared at the closed door. I was fairly certain that he really was Robert Merriam, that he did own the Paradise Broadcasting Company and that he wanted a tail on Frank Weir. As far as the rest of his story went, I didn't think there was much truth in it.

THE "Club" Papeete is on a side road just off Farrington Highway, near Waianae. It is a very fancy name considering the none too clean little bar, a row of booths, a handful of tables and a juke box. At the moment, it was not exactly a center of gay abandon. I was the sole customer at the bar and the part-Hawaiian bartender wasn't talkative. In a rear booth, two Portuguese rolled dice for drinks and lied in loud voices about their conquests. Frank Weir sat scowling in the booth directly behind me.

His companion could be described with a long whistle, a guttural male noise or simply by saying she was the sort of female that wives never seem to care for. She was blonde and wore a black, long-sleeved, high-necked street dress and a single strand of matched pearls. The attire should have created a demure effect but on her it successfully

suggested soft lights and sheer negligees. But she was small with a round face, a short straight nose, full lips and a too-wide mouth. I thought at first she was somebody I knew but it was just the expression. It reminded me of a self-satisfied, well-fed alley cat.

She had been waiting when I followed Weir in almost an hour earlier. Ever since Weir had sat down and ordered a drink he had been pleading or threatening, I couldn't tell which, while his companion concentrated on her several drinks. Now, she put her hand over his and shook her head adamantly from side to side. I had turned casually on the bar stool and her eyes caught mine. For an instant our eyes held and I swiveled back to the bar. Through the mirror I saw Weir continue to talk and the blonde go back to her drink. Suddenly Weir stood up and looked down at her, his face full of rage and torment. She stared at him with a blank, china-doll expression and said a few words. Weir fumbled for his wallet, tossed a bill on the table and strode angrily out of the Club Papeete. I looked at my watch and let him go. It was seven-thirty and I knew he was due at the studio to broadcast at eight.

The blonde finished her drink, took a mirror from her bag and used her little finger to smooth already smooth lipstick. She gathered up her bag and short jacket and moved out of my line of vision. I caught the heavy scent of *Tabu* and she slipped up on the bar stool beside me. She tossed the jacket on the bar and took a gold cigarette case and a long holder from the bag. She concentrated on the job of fitting the cigarette into the holder. Slowly her green eyes came up to meet mine in the mirror.

I held the lighted match to her cigarette, lit my own. "Frank Weir seems to be more than slightly annoyed."

The cat's eyes didn't change expression. "You know him?"

I shrugged. "You meet one tramp announcer, you know them all."

She eyed my glass. "I'll have a double what you're having."

I ordered two double Scotches and water.

She drank half the contents of the small glass before she put it down. "You have to order double drinks in these places or you don't get an edge."

"You want an edge?"

She frowned. "What's a tramp announcer?"

"Like Weir—fairly nice looking with wavy hair the girls like to run their hands through and a voice that could sell central heating to the Fiji Islanders. He never quite makes the grade because he lacks the requisite guts. It's too easy to swipe little bits of what he wants and make up the rest with whisky and wenches who don't have complicated morals. Usually, he leaves town in a hurry."

She made patterns on the bar with her glass. "Why does he leave town in a hurry?"

"Sometimes it's a misunderstanding about the whereabouts of the petty cash and sometimes just a boyfriend or a husband with a nasty temper."

"That must be hard on the girls."

I grinned. "The girls are usually glad to see him go. Curly-locks gets kind of demanding toward the end."

She didn't look up. "What's your name?"

"Johnny Ford."

"What do you do for a living, Johnny Ford?"

"Poke my nose into other people's business."

Her face was still expressionless but the voice was on the chilled side. "You're a bit hard on the rest of the poor little human race, aren't you?"

I stared at her dispassionately. "I don't like tramps."

She flushed. "You lousy fourflusher!" She snatched her bag and jacket off the bar, slid from the stool and swept out. She had a nice figure.

The fat bartender waddled toward me with a worried look. I slid my glass at him. "Another double Scotch."

He made it and put it down in front of me, his gaze still turned thoughtfully toward the door. I asked: "Who was the blonde?"

He looked at me in surprise. "Don't you know her?"

I shook my head.

"Mrs. Robert Merriam."

I stopped the drink halfway to my lips. "Mrs. Merriam, Junior," I stated hopefully.

His face lit up in a gold-fanged grin and he shook his head. "The one and only Mrs. Robert Merriam." He emphasized the "one and only."

"She come in here often?"

His face went blank. "Once in awhile."

"With the same fellow?"

The fat bartender's face hardened into definite unfriendliness. "I wouldn't know, pal. Why don't you ask the lady?"

"Maybe I will." I paid for the drinks, went out to my coupe and headed for town.

I WAS sore. It boiled down to the fact that Merriam had checked on me before calling in person. He had probably been satisfied with what he heard—except he found out I didn't handle divorce work. A little thing like that wouldn't bother him, since he would be leery of the usual boudoir-and-key-hole shamus anyway. Instead of trying to buy me by doubling or tripling my fee, he gave me a song and dance about low profits in a radio station and vague suspicions of the clever Frank Weir—knowing if I tailed Weir long enough I would run across Mrs. Merriam. I'd turn in the report and Merriam would

have enough evidence to get rid of her without a heavy cash settlement—he hoped.

I thought about the little blonde and grinned. She didn't look dumb. It might be interesting to find out what type of brass knuckles she used when the going got tough. I crossed off the idea. I have never felt any deep-seated desire to walk into a buzz saw just for kicks. I decided to drive into town and tell Merriam what he could do with his case. I felt better immediately.

It was a nice night for a drive. I snapped on the radio in the middle of Gershwin's Concerto in F. It was Oscar Levant's recording and I happen to think nobody can play Gershwin's music like Levant. I lit a cigarette, relaxed and enjoyed it. It ended too soon and there was a spot announcement about somebody's acid pills. Suddenly a very raucous and very bad arrangement of One O'Clock Jump blared out.

I started to change stations when the music faded and the smooth voice of Frank Weir floated out of the speaker. If there was anger and torment in his soul, his voice didn't give it away. The guy was good. It was a half hour request program of popular recordings and "Frankie" sounded a sophisticated eighteen. His chatter was full of jive lingo and apparently the bobby-soxers ate it up. I left it on and listened. Anyway, I could tell Merriam I had kept Weir under surveillance until I quit the case.

The program was almost over when I turned off Dillingham Boulevard into King Street. The recording came to an end and I could hear the clicking noise it made as it completed each revolution. A minute went by—two minutes—three minutes. I waited for Frankie's dulcet voice. Hundreds of kids, maybe thousands, were waiting for Frankie. Then the clicking noise segued into some unidentifiable light classic. The music faded

and a gruff voice announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, due to circumstances beyond our control, we are unable to bring you the rest of the program to which you have been listening." The music came up in volume.

It was a stock announcement. The speaker's voice had authority and no indication of mike fright, but it also had the singsong quality of one unused to radio broadcasting. A hunch told me the voice belonged to somebody at the transmitter across town from the studios. Some kind of line failure, I tried to reason. By that time, I was at the intersection of King and Iwilei. I turned into Iwilei, took the short block and turned into Queen Street. There wasn't much traffic along the waterfront and there were no traffic lights. I shoved down hard on the gas and headed for Waikiki and the broadcasting studio.

CHAPTER TWO

Turntable Death

A LINCOLN sedan pulled out of a parking space in front of the low modernistic building. I moved into the space, hurried out of the car and into the building. There was no one in the receptionist's anteroom. I half-ran down the long black and white linoleum-tiled corridor to where the brightly-lit control room stood out between the darkened studios. The heavy door was open and two telephones competed angrily with the music from the wall speaker.

Frank Weir sat with his back to me at the control panel, right hand loosely grasping the desk microphone, his head cushioned comfortably on crooked left arm. A forked line of coagulating blood pointed like an arrow to the small hole just behind the right ear. The turntables on either side of him continued sound-

lessly to spin out their seventy-eight r.p.m.'s, cheerfully demonstrating that the world moves on in spite of what happens to the erratic creatures who temporarily inhabit it.

I found switches and stopped the spinning records. Both ringing telephones had typewritten labels scotch-taped to their bases. I picked up the receiver of the one marked "Transmitter." It was the voice I had heard on the air.

"Dammit, Weir, you've been off the air fifteen minutes! Why don't you go to the can before you take over—or are you drunk again?"

"This is not Weir."

"Where is he? Put him on!"

"He can't come to the phone. He's dead."

"Dead drunk, hunh?"

"Just plain dead."

"Are you kidding?"

"He's got a hole in his head—a bullet hole."

"Jeez, they finally got him!"

"Who?"

"Hell, I dunno. Lots of people."

"Anybody in particular?"

"Say! Who is this?"

"I'll be seeing you."

"Hey! Wait a minute! What am I supposed to do about the rest of the programs tonight? I can't handle all that stuff from the transmitter!"

"That's your problem, sonny." I hung up.

He rang back at once. I lifted the receiver, laid it on the desk and let it sputter. I picked up the telephone marked "Outside."

A teen-age girl whined: "Frankie, what *happuned* to our program?"

"The program has been cancelled. You ought to be in bed now, anyway." I hung up and before I could dial it was ringing again.

A young male voice with a distinctly Oriental inflection said: "The whole

joint's jim-jam-jumpin' out here at Palama, Frankie lad, and we don't dig that chintz you're shovin' at us. Come on, bust your vest and give us a Galliard oldie. How's about Ceement Mixer, Frankie boy, putzy, putzy—"

I hung up and the phone rang immediately. A small female voice bleated: "Frankieeee!" I cursed and laid the receiver beside the other one.

I went out into the corridor. The phone on the receptionist's desk was ringing now. I headed in the other direction past another studio, a door marked *Library*, and a large general office. I pushed through a smooth-paneled door bearing the gilt-lettered information *General Manager*, turned on the lights and saw a big desk of dark wood with a green leather-padded swivel chair. The phone on the desk was silent. I dialed Lieutenant Walter Chun's private number, told him what I had found and said I would stand by. He said he could make it in ten minutes.

I hung up and looked around the office. I saw sand-colored walls, drawn Venetian blinds, more green leather furniture, a built-in wall speaker, a large Capehart and another cabinet which looked like a radio and turned out to be a small, well-stocked bar. All the windows were closed and locked. A narrow door in the side wall opened into a small lavatory. Its single frosted window was also locked.

I didn't doubt that the killer had used the front entrance but I went out into the large general office anyway. There were open windows here but the screens were fastened on the inside and the Venetian blinds were lowered and fastened to the sill. All but one of the desks were as neatly barren as a civil servant's five minutes before quitting time. That one bore a triangular nameplate which said: *M. Gardas—Bookkeeper*. A typewriter had been wheeled up to

the desk and in it was one of the station's printed bill forms. It was blank. On the desk were a couple of dozen statements, typed out and addressed, each slipped under its individual envelope flap, ready for folding and sealing. A looseleaf notebook lay open at a type-written list of local business firms. The ashtray contained four cigarette stubs, three with lipstick, one without. There wasn't anything else to see.

I went out into the corridor, found the solid door to the record library locked, peered into the darkened studios and went back to the control room. The wall speaker was emitting Viennese waltzes one after another without any announcements. I wondered if my transmitter friend was going to have enough of them to last all evening. I cradled both telephones and the outside phone began to ring again. I let it ring and bent over Weir. His curled fingers were within a few inches of the microphone switch. If he had lived a few seconds longer he might have made radio history by opening the switch and announcing his killer's name from one end of the Hawaiian archipelago to the other. The wail of a siren rose above the music. I looked at Weir's pockets longingly and backed out of the room. I went down to the receptionist's anteroom, lit a cigarette and barely got my feet on the desk when there was a scuffle and loud voices, and the door swung open.

LIEUTENANT Walter Chun came in first, a slender, broad-shouldered Chinese in the middle thirties, with shining patent leather hair and hard, intelligent eyes that glistened like black enamel. Following practically on his heels was a stocky, powerfully built man with a round head and blue jowls, and a trim brunette who seemed to be all eyes. A uniformed cop came in last and stood against the door.

Bluejowls bustled over to me.

"What's going on here? Who are you?"

"Mr. Ford put through the call," Chun said and nodded toward the pair. "Mr. Watson Hardy, station manager, and Mrs. Hardy. Where is it, Johnny?"

"In the control room."

Chun motioned the uniformed cop to remain at the door and went down the corridor with the three of us trailing. In the control room Hardy pushed past him, stopped abruptly.

"My God!"

Mrs. Hardy brought the back of her hand up to her mouth. Her eyes held some emotion more complex than simple shock. The telephone was still ringing. Chun picked it up and listened. He grunted and slammed the receiver down. The phone rang again. Chun followed the cord to the switchboard and pulled out the plug.

Hardy noticed the loudspeaker on the wall for the first time. He stared at it and rushed over to the long-carriage typewriter standing beside the control desk. "My Lord! The studio has been off the air since eight twenty-three!"

I looked over his shoulder with Chun. Inserted in the typewriter was a standard radio station log sheet, space and columns for sponsor, announcer, type show, musical selection, length of commercial, and so on. The last entry was *Night and Day*—8:23. I looked at Chun.

"That's going to save the coroner a lot of trouble. The record was about three minutes long, which puts his killing between eight twenty-three and approximately eight twenty-six."

Chun nodded as Hardy ran to the transmitter phone and dialed. He got my old pal on the phone, told him to keep the music going and hung up and tossed us a harried look.

"I've got to get Rex MacAvoy up here to take over the broadcasting. If you

want me, I'll be in my office. Come on, Helen!"

Helen Hardy had been standing just inside the door, staring fixedly at Frank Weir's bowed figure. She turned, cast an enigmatic glance over her shoulder and followed her husband down the hall to his office.

Chun turned to me. "Give."

"You ever heard of Robert Merriam?"

"He owns this place, doesn't he?"

I said he did and gave him the whole story from the beginning. Chun didn't ask any questions after I finished. He stared tentatively at the body, shrugged and said: "Let's go see Hardy."

I knew what the irritated shrug meant. The law in Hawaii says nobody can touch the body of the deceased until the coroner has made his examination. And since the law doesn't make any exceptions, it applies to cops too. I said: "You going to let a little thing like a law stop you from frisking him?"

Chun grinned. "Never break a law, Johnny, unless it's absolutely necessary. In this case, it's not. Let's go."

Helen Hardy was seated on the low green sofa watching her husband sweat on the telephone.

". . . Yes, Mr. Lecky . . . We're going to run your announcement at a later time tonight . . . I know you contracted for the eight-thirty time . . . Of course you won't have to pay for it. Furthermore, we'll extend your contract for another week at no extra charge . . . Rewrite it? Well . . . More class, huh? Perhaps you're right. Suppose you come in to my office say, at two tomorrow afternoon and we'll work it out. O.K.? . . . That's fine, Mr. Lecky. See you at two, Mr. Lecky. Goodbye, Mr. Lecky." He hung up, got out his handkerchief and mopped his face.

Helen grinned maliciously. "Was that Mr. Lecky?"

He threw her an angry glance, looked

at us and gestured with the handkerchief. "Can you beat it? He runs a drive-in barbecue stand. He buys a fifty-word spot announcement to run once a night and he thinks he owns the station. He listens every night for the damn thing. He can hardly speak English and he wants to write his own commercials—he wants more class!"

Chun said: "Anybody supposed to be working here tonight besides Weir?"

Hardy picked up a mimeographed program schedule from his desk. "No. MacAvoy had it until eight. Weir was on until closing and MacAvoy comes on again at six in the morning." He shook his head. "I hated to call the boy back again tonight but what can I do? My other two announcers are in Hilo."

"How come?"

"Vacation. It looked like an easy period and Rex and Weir were willing to do double duty so I let the other two go. It never fails. If I had any brains, I'd get out of radio!"

"What about this MacAvoy?" Chun interrupted. "What kind of a guy is he?"

"A good clean-cut personality. The most dependable man I've got."

"Would he hang around after Weir relieved him?"

"Sometimes they do. Not MacAvoy tonight, though. His wife is home with the flu. He probably had his hat and coat on when Weir came in."

"What kind of a guy was Weir?"

Hardy threw up his hands. "A problem! He had more natural ability than all the rest of the boys put together—a born showman and a born salesman—but undependable. Always something."

"Any trouble about money?"

"All the time. He was always in debt. Once he hit me for five hundred dollars. I gave it to him in a weak moment." Hardy was struck with a sudden thought. "He still owes it to me!"

"Did Weir run around much?"

"You mean women?"

"Women," said Chun patiently.

Hardy shrugged. "I suppose so. Though what women saw in him I wouldn't know. A smooth-talking character with no more principle than a tomcat." His eyes rested momentarily on his wife.

"You happen to know of anybody in particular?"

Hardy hesitated. "No, I don't think so, not anybody in particular."

I asked: "Did he see a lot of Mrs. Merriam?"

I felt rather than saw Helen Hardy's narrow-eyed concentration. Hardy looked startled. "Margo Merriam? She wouldn't fool around with—Say! You're not going to bring Robert Merriam into this, are you?"

"Why?" Chun asked.

"If Merriam didn't like it, he could close down the station and never miss it. It would ruin me!"

"Why should he want to do that?" I asked.

"I didn't say he wanted to. But he could—he owns the station. Besides," he sneered, "if Margo is seeing too much of anybody, it's Paul Cooper."

"Watson!" Helen Hardy's voice cracked out like a whip.

"Is that the Paul Cooper who manages Dray's Department Store?" Chun asked.

Hardy glared at his wife. "That's the one—the eligible bachelor," he glowered. "A real gentleman." He checked himself apologetically. "Cooper's all right, I guess—besides, Dray's is one of our best accounts."

"Did Weir know Cooper?"

"He handled the Dray's account. Only a couple of day's ago Cooper called up and gave me hell about him."

"Why?" Chun grunted.

"Weir had worked out a sort of quiz

show—he was the master of ceremonies and he got four prominent people around town to sit on a panel and answer questions the listeners wrote in. Not a new idea but it went over well. It was sustaining and Dray's had decided to buy it beginning next month. Weir spent a lot of time in the store getting ideas for commercials. Then Cooper called up and said Dray's had a competent department to work out advertising methods and would I please tell Weir to stay the hell off the premises except when he was sent for. Cooper was all wet and I told him so in a nice way but he got nasty and threatened to cancel the show, so I backed down and smoothed it over."

"What did Weir say?"

"He just laughed—"

THERE was a knock on the door and a tanned, serious-faced young man with circles under his eyes came into the office. He nodded at the group and smiled weakly at Helen Hardy. Hardy stood up.

"Come in, Rex, my boy. Sorry to get you out again tonight. How is Mrs. MacAvoy?"

"She's all right, sir. She was sleeping when I left. It's too bad about Frank."

"Terrible, my boy, terrible. You know Helen, and this is Lieutenant Chun, the officer in charge of the case. And this is Mr. Ford. He's—" He stopped. "Just what are you doing here, Mr. Ford?"

"He's with me," said Chun, turning to MacAvoy. "You were relieved by Weir at eight o'clock?"

"Yes, sir."

"You hang around after you were relieved?"

"No, sir. I left right away."

"Anybody else here when you left?"

"No, sir. Not a soul."

"Who was the last person you saw in the building, except Weir?"

"The office people were all gone by

five. There were some kids around until about six-thirty and a boy from the drug store brought me a couple of sandwiches and a coke about seven o'clock. He was the last person I saw until Frank showed up."

"Did Weir say he was expecting anybody up here to meet him?"

"No, sir. He wasn't very talkative. He seemed to have a grouch on about something."

"He tell you what it was?"

"No, sir. We just went over the schedule and I left."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sure."

Chun turned to Hardy. "O.K."

Hardy said: "No special instructions, my boy. We missed a lot of commercials. Squeeze them in now the best you can. I'll call sponsors tomorrow and apologize and tell them we're not billing them for tonight."

"Yes, sir." MacAvoy hesitated in the doorway. "I was wondering about that participation show tomorrow night, Mr. Hardy. I can work it from the control room but won't it be kind of hard on the guest stars?"

Hardy clapped a hand to his forehead. "Holy mackerel! I forgot all about that! You'll have to ride gain in the control room and I'll emcee the show—or maybe I can get one of the boys back from Hilo in time. Give me time to think it out."

"Yes, sir." MacAvoy went out of the office taking off his coat.

Hardy slumped in his chair. "That was the program I was telling you about—the one for Dray's. And what's worse, Paul Cooper is one of the guests on the program. It'll never go over."

"Who else is on the program?" Helen Hardy asked idly.

He picked up the program schedule. "Professor Snowden, that woman up at the University who's an authority on

bugs, and Fred Fisher, the correspondent. He's passing through on his way to Korea. And—" he looked up from the sheet, "Margo Merriam."

The door swung open and the cop who had been stationed at the front entrance stuck his head in. "The wrecking crew's finished, Lieutenant, and Doctor Mac said to ask if you wanted to see him."

Chun nodded affirmatively. The cop withdrew and Chun turned back to Hardy. "You going to stick around for awhile?"

Hardy lifted a clip-board of type-written pages. "Most of these haven't gotten on the air. I'll be checking sponsors half the night."

Little Dr. Mac Freyling didn't have much to add to what we already knew. A single .22 slug had killed Frank Weir. Doctor Mac is a stickler for Medical Science—two words he capitalizes even in conversation—and though confronted with the control room log sheet he refused to narrow down the time of death until after the PM. He proclaimed that "scientific fact is not achieved by guesswork," and left grumbling about the frivolous amateurs they were letting on the police force these days. Since it was well known that Dr. Mac had brought Walter Chun into the world, he left only tolerant grins behind him.

Weir had been carrying the usual junk—a wallet with eighteen dollars in it, a wristwatch, a keyring with half a dozen keys, a dollar and a quarter in change, a crumpled pocket handkerchief, a neatly-folded breastpocket handkerchief with a faint lipstick smear and a heavy *Tabu* scent, a mechanical pencil, a fountain pen and a looseleaf pocket notebook.

CHUN thumbed through the notebook. There were semitechnical notes, some rough diagrams of studio layouts, and near the end, a four page, finely spaced list of Honolulu retail

stores of all kinds—drug stores, dress shops, markets, gas stations. A few were crossed out and beside each name that wasn't crossed out were two sets of figures, obviously dollars and cents figures. The right hand set of figures was in all cases equal to one fourth of its adjacent left hand group.

Chun flipped back to the first page of the list. At the head of it were the letters: *N.Y.*

"What's New York got to do with these Honolulu stores?"

I said: "Maybe we've got something."

"This New York?"

"New Year's was three weeks ago. This could be a list of sales for that day."

Chun shrugged.

"You notice those figures in the right hand column are always twenty-five percent of the ones on the left?"

"Weir's commissions?"

"When I was a kid on the Coast, I used to work around a radio station. I don't remember any commissions that high."

Chun closed the notebook.

I took it out of his hand and opened it again. "There was a perfectly legitimate racket they used to pull," I mused. "On special occasions, like holidays, the station would high pressure its customers into buying 'Greetings of the Season' announcements. Stuff like 'Joe Doakes' Market wishes you a Merry Christmas and don't forget you can get all the fixin's for that Christmas dinner at Joe Doakes' Market.'"

Chun eyed me distastefully.

I grinned. "You know they buy it. The gimmick is this: because of the overwhelming demand for time on that particular day, the rates are boosted a little—say ten percent. Most of them think that makes sense, so they pay it."

"So what?"

I shrugged. "What's to prevent Weir from getting on the phone and high

pressuring all these people into buying New Year's announcements at twenty-five percent over the regular rates and pocketing the difference?"

"The bookkeeper."

"What do you mean?"

"Somebody is going to pay his bill by mail. The bookkeeper would catch it."

"Maybe we can take care of that too."

I led the way back to the big office and the bookkeeper's desk. The top addressed statement was made out to "Beck's Dress Shoppe." It was also the first name on Weir's list and the first name in the open notebook on the desk. I checked both lists. The list in the Gardas notebook was an exact duplicate of Weir's except that the names scratched out in Weir's had not been listed. I handed the dress shop bill and Weir's notebook to Chun. "The bill agrees with the larger figure."

Under the glass top of the desk was a schedule of the station's rates. Chun checked it with the bill.

"The regular rate for a fifty-word announcement, plus twenty-five percent, would equal the amount of this bill." He straightened and looked around the office. "Looks like this Gardas was working late tonight."

"It ties in. MacAvoy said the office force was gone by five. Gardas would know Weir was due on at eight. He could come in and make out these bills with him. When the checks started coming in they would all be routed to Gardas. He could carry the regular rate on the books and split the gravy with Weir."

Chun picked up the bills. "We better check with Hardy."

"And find out why Gardas left suddenly in the middle of his work," I grinned.

Helen Hardy was seated with her feet on the sofa, reading a two months' old copy of *Variety*. Hardy was smoking

furiously and glaring at the silent telephone as though he dared it to bite him. I said: "You promote announcements from business houses for special occasions, don't you—like Mother's Day and New Year's?"

"Certainly. All stations do that," he said irritably.

"You charge more for those announcements?"

"As a matter of fact, we don't. Why?"

Chun tossed the typed bills on his desk. "These mean anything to you?"

Hardy frowned and picked up the top statement. He lowered it and ran his finger down the rate chart. He picked up another and then a third. "Where did you get these?"

"Can you explain them?"

"The ones I've checked are incorrect. Where did you get them?"

Chun handed him the open notebook. "Weir's."

Hardy examined it and slowly his face purpled. "That son of a—" He turned over the pages, calculating as he read. Helen Hardy got up with a quick nervous movement and peered over his shoulder. Hardy said: "Twenty-five percent overcharge. Not bad for a day's work. Where did you find these bills?"

"On your bookkeeper's desk. It looks like he was working late tonight."

"It's a girl—Miriam Gardas." Hardy spoke half to himself. "I've noticed him hanging over her desk a lot. I wasn't suspicious because Weir would hang around anything that wore a skirt."

"Where does Miss Gardas live?"

He consulted a list, pulled the telephone over to him and dialed.

"Mr. Gardas? This is Mr. Hardy down at the radio station. May I speak to Miriam, please? . . ." He frowned into the phone. "Not since this morning? . . . I see . . . No, nothing important. Sorry to have troubled you, Mr. Gardas. Good night." He cradled the receiver.

"Miriam hasn't been home since this morning. She hasn't called and they don't know where she is."

Chun said: "Let's go." He paused at the door. "I want to see you in the morning." Hardy nodded slowly and Helen Hardy bit into her lower lip.

I followed Chun out to the front entrance. "You going out to the girl's house?"

He nodded.

I said: "I think I'll pay my client a visit."

"If you get anything out of old man Merriam—"

"I'll give you a call," I promised.

CHAPTER THREE

Muscle Menace

THE library could have belonged to somebody's grandfather. With any sort of luck, of course, Merriam could have been somebody's grandfather. The furniture was heavy, overstuffed brown leather and bookshelves rose from floor to ceiling on three sides. A well-worn Oriental rug covered most of the dark floor. Only the indirect lamp by Merriam's chair was lit. He had moved aside the inlaid chess table with its tall, intricately carved pieces and sat staring at me. He was wearing a faded brown bathrobe and an aged pair of brown leather carpet slippers. He looked very old.

He made a steeple of long slender fingers and peered over it at various objects in the room. He spoke as though he had to lift each word bodily and hand it over to me and the words were very, very heavy.

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Ford."

I waited.

"I wasn't seeking a divorce. You must understand that." He eyed my raised eyebrows and a tight ironic smile twisted

his lips. "I am an old man. Until recently I looked on myself as an 'older' man. Now I realize that I am an old man. It is a familiar story—the old man and the beautiful child-wife."

"And one day the child-wife grew up?"

"My first wife died many years ago. Margo is twenty-eight. With such a disparity of ages there is bound to be a certain difference of interests. Margo prefers to have people around her a great deal of the time. She likes gaiety and high spirits, parties and dancing. I am not too old for that sort of thing but I found it exceedingly tiresome because it bored me. After we had been married a few months I decided very sensibly to remain at home with a good book and suggest that Margo go out occasionally with the young people of her own age group. It seemed sensible at the time."

"How did she take the suggestion?"

"At first she didn't approve. But when I made it clear that such an arrangement would entail no sacrifice on my part, that I had a whole lifetime of good solid reading to catch up on, she allowed herself to be persuaded. The arrangement worked very well for a while."

"Now it works too well?"

"I have seen very little of my wife these past few months."

"But you don't want a divorce."

Merriam smiled wryly. "It was always possible that you would uncover grounds for a divorce. I hoped not. In any event, I had no intention of using them. What I really wanted to find out was where my wife goes, whom she sees, what she does. I know little or nothing about the people with whom she spends most of her time. I thought young Weir would be a good starting point."

"Why?"

"He had telephoned the house several times. I saw him only once but in

my judgment he was a clever weakling with little or no character. That was the basis for my imaginary story about the radio station's finances. Having formed the opinion I had, I thought it quite possible that you would uncover some sort of petty pilfering in the process of your investigation."

I grinned. "Hardy is tearing his hair now."

Merriam eyed me steadily. "I am in love with my wife, Mr. Ford. My only real concern is for her happiness." He gazed at the grandfather's clock in the corner. "She rarely comes in early and she is drinking too much. If I should discover there is someone else, someone of whom she has grown fond, I would want to do what I could for her happiness."

"Where is Mrs. Merriam now?"

He shook his head.

"Under the circumstances, I shouldn't think you'd want me to go on with the—research."

"On the contrary, I should consider it a great favor if you would remain in my employ. I have explained my position. The situation has, of course, altered. Your sole aim would be to discover the murderer of Frank Weir." He watched my expression and smiled. "I realize that is police business and I don't expect miracles. I want you as my personal agent and as a sort of extra-legal supplement to the police investigation."

"Does that mean you really want an investigation, or does it mean you want me to use my cop friends to keep you informed as to what's going on?"

He eyed me quizzically. "You are a very sensitive young man."

"You haven't answered my question."

His face took on a hardness I hadn't seen before. "I want the murderer apprehended and this investigation concluded without publicity."

I wondered how tough you have to be

to start from scratch in a cane field and end up with six million bucks. "You may not have much luck avoiding publicity."

He smiled gently. "We will see."

I got up. "I'll do what I can."

He rose and walked to the door with me. "You have an absolutely free hand. Report to me when you see fit."

We shook hands and I walked down to where my car was parked on the drive. As I got into the car I looked back. He was still framed rigidly in the lighted doorway.

WHEN I awoke at six the next morning, rain was pouring down in bucketsful out of a blackly scowling sky. I padded out to get the paper and wondered why I made the effort to get up. In spite of the rain the air was close and I left the front door open and locked the screen.

There was less than a quarter-column on page two about Frank Weir's death. The announcer had died suddenly at the broadcasting studio and I was an unidentified person who had discovered the body. There was no background stuff and Weir could have died from beriberi or old age. Police Lieutenant Walter Chun was withholding a full statement until he received the coroner's report.

I put coffee on and shaved and showered and went into the bedroom to dress. I got as far as trousers and shoes when the rain momentarily let up in its fury and I heard the coffee pot rattle. I decided I had underestimated it again and started through the living room toward the kitchen. I stopped and stared.

There was a tiny puddle of water on the floor inside the screen door. Drops left a trail to the kitchen. I went back to the bedroom and chose a pocket .32 from under the pile of shirts in the bureau. I slipped off the safety catch,

came back to the living room and took a deep breath and slammed open the kitchen door.

Margo Merriam was seated at the kitchen table in the act of raising a cup of coffee to her lips. She was wearing a pale green slack suit, a white open-neck blouse and white leather rain-splotched wedgees. A white rain cape was thrown across the table. She peered over the coffee cup at the gun and then at the skivvie shirt.

"Enter the menace—muscles and all."

"How did you get in here?"

She picked up the keyring on the table beside her and waved a gold penknife. "Used my key."

"You get in many apartments this way?"

"I smelled coffee and heard the shower running. I didn't want to disturb your bath."

"What do you want?"

She eyed the gun and the biceps again, mostly the latter. "Put some clothes on, Johnny Ford. I won't bite you."

I gave up and went back to the bedroom and finished dressing. When I returned to the kitchen she was starting on a second cup of coffee. She reached for the bottle on the table and I winced. She had discovered my only bottle of cognac. She smiled sweetly.

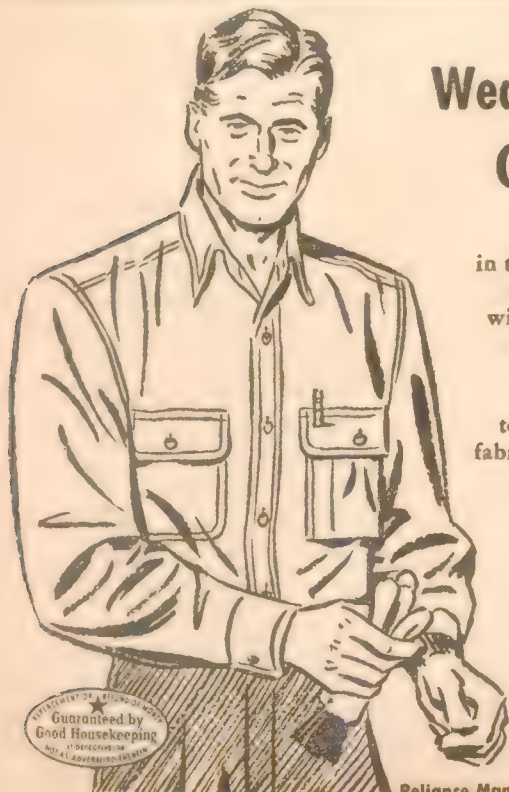
"Makes a nice cup of coffee."

I made bacon and eggs and ate in silence. Margo smoked and had a third brandy and coffee. I held the dishes under the tap and went out to the living room sofa. When Margo sat beside me, I got up and moved to a chair across the room.

"Still afraid I'll bite, Johnny?"

I got a cigarette out of the battered pack. "I'm afraid to strike a match near you, Mrs. Merriam."

"Call me Margo." She got up and



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went into the kitchen and I heard the bottle rattle against the cup and she came back again. "I'm going to give up drinking as soon as I can think of a good reason."

"Am I supposed to give you a reason?"

She stirred the coffee. "What an odd thing to ask."

"You weren't lured up here by my dashing charm."

She grinned. "How can you be sure?"

"What do you want, Mrs. Merriam?"

"Margo."

"Margo."

She nodded. "You were following Frank last night."

"You could be wrong."

She shook her head. "Not after I learned you discovered his body—and were alone at the time."

"You get around."

She rested the cup on the end table. "That wasn't funny when you used different words to say it last night."

"Last night you walked out."

"Let's get something understood, Johnny," she said flatly. "At present, all I'm interested in is a little information."

"What do you want to know?"

Her look told me I ought not to lean over backwards. "You are a private detective."

"It's a legal occupation."

"I know you couldn't have anything against Frank, personally. I've got to know who hired you to kill him."

I laughed out loud. "That's a new approach."

She gave me the smile again. "Don't tell me the police have overlooked that possibility?"

"They considered it and they threw it out."

She looked puzzled.

"Anybody who uses a .22 is either dumb or very, very good, sweetheart.

The cops know I never rely on anything that small for my murders. What we ought to consider is a third possibility, to wit: small caliber guns fit nicely into women's handbags."

The wheels spun slowly. "You think Miss Gardas—?"

"Not necessarily—" I stared at her. "You do get around, don't you?"

"If you say that again, I'm going to throw something at you."

SHE leaned forward, chin in hand, and began to think aloud. "Frank and Miss Gardas were stealing money from the radio station. She came back last night to type those bills and they got into an argument. She waited her chance, watched him cut off the microphone switch and shot him."

"Very neat. All wrapped up in a pretty package with no loose ends."

"Certainly."

"I like it better if she's working at her desk and hears a shot. She goes out to the corridor, sees the killer and recognizes him—or her. Maybe the killer looks back or something. Then she gets scared and runs away."

"That's silly. They were both stealing money. You've got a perfect motive—thieves falling out. And maybe something more personal, too," she added as an afterthought.

I eyed her. "I could be wrong."

Margo opened her purse and took out a bill. "Have you got fifty dollars?"

"Why?"

"I'll bet this hundred against it that you *are* wrong."

The telephone rang and I crossed to it, still trying to read her expression.

"Ford?"

"Yeah."

"Chun. We've got Miriam Gardas."

"When?"

"About an hour ago out at Black Point."

"What does the party have to say?"

"What's the matter with you? Can't you talk?"

"No."

"Oh." He paused. "We found her body out in the surf wedged between the rocks. She had two .22 slugs in her head. The tide was supposed to carry her out, I guess."

"Any idea as to time?"

"She got it about the same time as Weir."

"I see. Well, thanks for calling. Anything else—in general?"

"We've got people going around with Hardy's salesmen to check Weir's accounts. Might bring in something. I'm not betting on it. You get anything out of old man Merriam?"

"Nothing except he's a pretty tough hombre."

"You still working for him?"

"I guess so."

"How much are you still working for him?"

"I'm not expected to run the police department, if that's what you mean."

"You coming down here?"

"Not right away. I want to do a little checking."

"I'm not through with your client yet."

I grinned. "I don't blame you."

"So long."

"So long." I hung up and turned back to Margo. "It's been very nice, Mrs. Merriam, but now I've got work to do." I went into the bedroom and got coat, hat and raincoat. I came back to the living room and Margo had put on the rain cape and was waiting at the door. She was eyeing me expectantly and still clutching the hundred dollar bill.

I looked at her and at the bill. I took the bill out of her hand, pocketed it and held the screen door open for her.

She glared at me. "I won't ask you a thing, damn you."

I grinned, bowed her out and followed her down the outside stairway. At the bottom, she crossed the street without looking back and climbed into a maroon Cadillac convertible.

The rain had slacked off to a drizzle and I walked unhurriedly around the building to the garage. I wanted to give her plenty of time to get away. I eased the coupe out into Kuhio and turned left, away from where she had been parked. As I expected, it didn't do any good. By the time I got to Seaside I picked her up in the mirror. My beat-up coupe could never outdistance the Caddy and there wasn't enough traffic in Waikiki to throw her off.

I burned up Seaside to Ala Wai, ignored the "Stop" sign and skidded around the corner towards town, narrowly missing an overloaded garbage truck. I did a fast couple of blocks down to Lewers, turned left again and picked out a driveway with a heavy panax hedge. I threw the wheel over, slid up the driveway and cut the ignition. I twisted in the seat and watched the big maroon convertible tear by, headed toward Kalakaua. I started to turn away and swiveled back again, blinking. Barreling along at a safe distance behind the Caddy was a heavy, black, chauffeur-driven Lincoln sedan. Leaning forward tensely in the rear seat was my client, Robert Merriam.

I hadn't known I was leading a parade.

CHAPTER THREE

Lady Killer

BY THE time I got downtown, the rain had stopped and the sun was shining brightly. I parked, tossed my raincoat into the rumble and crossed the street and entered Dray's Department Store.

I made my way across the main floor and up to the mezzanine offices. A cute, gum-chewing little thing led me into a larger office and turned me over to a formidable female of fifty odd. Mrs. Soames smiled agreeably enough when she learned I wasn't selling anything and didn't have any complaints for the management.

"Mr. Cooper has stepped out for a moment, Mr. Ford. If you'd care to wait?"

I said I would care to wait.

"Just step into his office. I'm sure he'll be back in five minutes or so."

The walls in Cooper's office were chartreuse. Flanking the windows were a pair of framed charcoal drawings of horses' heads executed in the anguished style of Donatello's saints. They looked like they were going to die of malnutrition if somebody didn't fetch a feedbag in a hell of a hurry. On the opposite wall hung an architect's sketch of the Dray Building. The modern sofa and chairs to match were of blond Philippine mahogany, as was the large flat-top desk. A silver-framed photograph on the desk showed an aggressive looking aristocratic older woman. Her long face bore a disturbing resemblance to the charcoal drawings on the wall. Next to the photograph was a pipe rack containing half a dozen pipes. A couple of them had actually been smoked but not more than once or twice. I crossed to the windows and was staring into the street and not admiring the view when the door opened and Cooper barged in.

He was of medium height, slender, with darkish blond hair cropped rather close to his head. His face bore the same slight resemblance to a horse as the photograph on the desk. He was wearing a double-breasted Glen Urquart plaid, a blue oxford shirt with a gold collar pin and he was every inch the busy young executive.

"Mr. Ford," he said briskly. "I'm Cooper. Sorry to keep you waiting." He moved around the desk and sat down. "What can I do for you?"

I sat in the chair beside the desk, got out one of my cards and handed it over. The smile he reserved for his best charge accounts was replaced by a look of inquiry.

"You knew Frank Weir, Mr. Cooper?"

His face took on a look of gravity. "I heard about it this morning. Too bad, poor fellow."

I matched his gravity. "I'm trying to get a line on Weir himself. I was hoping you could help me."

"Well—" he threw out a hand deprecatingly.

"You knew him, didn't you?"

"Hardly at all. You'd do much better to go to his employer or to some close friend."

"I understand you had business relations with him."

"Well," he admitted reluctantly, "Weir was preparing a radio program for our sponsorship."

"Any truth in the rumor that you had words with him over it?"

"Oh, good lord," he said impatiently, "that was purely a matter of policy." He paused. "I don't like to speak harshly of the dead, Mr. Ford, but I'm sure you've encountered men of Weir's type, yourself. He was making a nuisance of himself in the store and I was afraid that if he had the freedom of the premises much longer he'd be telling me how to run things. Since he wasn't the sort to take a reasonable hint, I went directly to his employer. I gather you have talked to Hardy?"

"You know of any enemies he had? Anybody who might have a grudge against him?"

Cooper permitted himself a smirk. "Some little waitress' husband, perhaps. I really wouldn't know."

"Just for the record, Mr. Cooper, where were you between eight and eight-thirty last night?"

Cooper reared up with a look of startled indignation.

"I just wanted to tip you off," I shrugged. "It's possible the police will be along with the same question. They check every angle in a murder case. You do remember what you were doing, don't you?"

His face had a faraway look. "I remember perfectly what I was doing."

"Well?"

His expression was noble and even more equine looking.

I grimaced. "O. K., a dame can alibi you. Is that it?"

He stood up, pale with anger. "Mr. Ford, as I understand it, you're not from the police?"

"Right."

"And you have no business in my office without my permission?"

"Right."

"Then will you please get the hell out?" he shouted.

I sighed and got up. "If that's the way you want it. I'll see you around, Sir Galahad. Maybe we can split a bale of hay sometime."

I went out and Mrs. Soames looked worried. I jerked a thumb over my shoulder. "He ought to watch that temper. It might lead to ulcers."

I went down the steps to the main floor, stopped in Hardware and bought some washers for faucets that didn't need repairing and used the occasion to look up toward the mezzanine. Cooper had come out to the rail and was eyeing me speculatively. I waved to him and sauntered out of the store.

I DROVE back to Waikiki, parked near the Outrigger Arcade and went up on the terrace and had lunch. The surfboard riders were out in

full force and I stalled around watching them until shortly before two o'clock. Then I went into the pay telephone and dialed the radio station.

"I'm calling about Mr. Lecky's appointment with Mr. Hardy."

"Who is calling, please?"

I repeated what I had said before.

"Mr. Lecky is with Mr. Hardy now. Which one did you want?"

"Oh, he's with Mr. Hardy now? Then it's all right, thank you." I hung up. I found Hardy's home address in the directory and headed for Portlock Road.

It was a low, California-style house with a long *lanai* overlooking the bay. It was expensively furnished and had the everything-has-its-place look that the homes of childless couples usually have. A Japanese maid dawdled in the kitchen, trying to find something to do.

Helen Hardy seemed surprised and somewhat pleased to see me. She also turned out to be something of a chatter-box. She insisted on making gin fizzies and I insisted on helping. She insisted I call her "Helen" and I agreed as long as she called me "Johnny."

It was peaceful in the cool shade of the *lanai*. I settled comfortably in a rattan lounge chair and watched the rays of the afternoon sun play over the ripples on the water. It was the first moment of silence Helen had permitted. After a polite interval she said: "This isn't exactly a social visit, is it, Johnny?"

"Not exactly, no."

"You want me to talk about Frank Weir, is that it?"

"I'd like to get your slant on it. Did he have any actual enemies that you know of?"

She played with her glass. "Frank could be irritating enough, but I don't know of anyone who disliked him enough to kill him."

"Where was he from?"

"I don't know, really. Just after the

war he sent a transcribed audition to the radio station. Watson liked his voice and sent him an offer. I believe he was at some station in the midwest at that time but he never replied to Watson's letter. Then, about a year ago, he turned up in Honolulu. It so happened that Watson needed another announcer and was delighted to give him the job." She stared out at the water. "He was rather sweet at first and we more or less sponsored him among our friends. He was a bit older than the average station announcer and he had traveled a lot. It was nice to have an extra man around—for parties and things." She looked to see if I had misinterpreted her.

I let her see that my thoughts were innocent. "By the way, you and Mr. Hardy can account for your movements last night, I suppose?"

She attempted a look of surprise.

I grinned. "If Chun hasn't asked you yet, it's because he hasn't gotten around to it. It might save some embarrassment if you got it squared away in your mind."

She had tensed but it could be a perfectly natural reaction. "We had dinner at the Outrigger Canoe Club." She paused and studied my face. "And in case you're remembering that the Outrigger is only a few blocks from the station, I can swear that no one left the table for more than five minutes. Then we came straight to the station. The first we knew of Frank's death was when we met Lieutenant Chun outside."

I finished my drink and rested it on the floor beside my chair. "You were saying that Weir changed after you got to know him?"

Helen pulled her mind back with effort. "I don't think he really changed. It was just that at first he was concerned with creating a good impression."

"He did act differently later?"

She shrugged. "He gradually drifted

away from our little group. He found more excitement, I suppose, and gayer parties." There was a hint of bitterness in her voice. "He drank an awful lot and he began to have trouble about money. I suppose he needed more money to keep up with his faster set."

"Meaning Margo Merriam?"

Two white patches appeared at the sides of her nostrils. Her mouth was tight. "He had met Margo by that time, yes."

"I gather you don't care for Margo."

Her nostrils quivered and the patches grew whiter. "I think she's flashy and common and a man-chaser."

"In short, you don't approve of her."

"In short, she's a five-letter word."

"Your husband said something about Margo and Paul Cooper."

"Paul Cooper wouldn't marry her in a million years," Helen said with relish.

"You still talking about Margo?"

She nodded.

"What about the husband she's already got?"

"People get divorces, Johnny."

I must have looked incredulous.

Helen grinned. "I ran into her in the powder room at the Royal a few months ago. She was quite stinko and she said she had a confession to make. Why she picked on me, I'll never know. We aren't friends. She said she was going to divorce Robert Merriam and marry Paul. She even said they already had their silver pattern picked out. I didn't believe a word of it but you never can tell."

"But nothing happened?"

"Nothing. She just stares right through me when she sees me now. But Paul would never marry her."

"Why not?"

"Paul gets around. He knows how to handle his women." There was a glint of admiration and perhaps a touch of longing in her eyes.

"What's Cooper like?"

"Lots of charm. A perfect gentleman."

"You mean he sends flowers and always lights your cigarette for you?"

She laughed. "You sound like Watson. Yes, he is very thoughtful. But he's not a professional hand-kisser. I know what you're thinking. Most men of that sort make a career out of it to hide their stupidity or to hide the fact that they're not such great shakes as men. But Paul is not like that. He's sophisticated and intelligent. And he does give exquisite dinner parties and he's a beautiful dancer. Watson doesn't like to dance," she said sadly.

I decided it was time to change the subject. "What about young MacAvoy? Did he have any particular reason to hate Weir?"

"Good heavens, no! I don't think he approved of Frank's private life but he admired his work tremendously. As a matter of fact, Frank took a liking to Rex and used to coach him in little tricks of the trade. Frank had his good side when he wasn't thinking about himself."

"Do you know Robert Merriam?"

"I've only seen him a few times. He's a sweet person. Very shy, though, and much too good for that creature he married."

I grinned and got up. "Thanks for everything, Helen. I'd better be getting along before that husband of yours comes home and thinks this is a rendezvous."

She was disappointed. "I wish you didn't have to go." Then she brightened. "But now that we've become acquainted you'll have to come out for dinner soon and tell us all about your interesting work."

I gritted my teeth inwardly and said I would be delighted.

She called to me as I was getting in the car: "Maybe we'll see you at the

broadcast tonight. You'll surely be there?"

I nodded and waved and rolled out of the driveway.

CHAPTER FOUR

One Motive Missing

HELEN HARDY was a lonely woman. She talked about people with the intentness of a person who has few friends and has spent many lonely hours in conjecture. From her attitude, I guessed she thought Watson would throw her over in a minute for a smile from Margo. I agreed with her. From the little I had observed, Watson would stumble all over himself to play the dancing cavalier if Margo so much as batted an eyelash. The fact that Margo probably thought Watson wasn't worth the trouble would only twist the knife deeper in Helen. I noticed absently that a sedan had pulled alongside and I slowed to let it pass.

Apparently, this was not the idea.

The sedan moved half a length ahead and slowly forced me off the road. I pulled off and stopped and the sedan parked in front of me. There were two men in the front seat and I saw the driver reach up and adjust the rear-view mirror. Then the two men got out opposite sides of the car. The driver was a long drink of water with a thin face sandwiched between big, pointed ears that stuck straight out from his head. The short one wore his head hammered down between his shoulders, an interesting arrangement that permitted him to dispense with a neck. His nose was flattened and there were scarred ridges on brow and cheekbone. He spat and announced: "It's him, all right."

"It is he," I said mildly.

"Get out of the car, Mac," Big-ears said dreamily.

"I like it here."

"We want to talk to you, Mac."

"Start talking."

"Get around to the other side, Shorty," said Big-ears.

I slid out the other side, slammed the door and backed up against the car as Shorty approached. Big-ears opened the door on his side, crawled over the seat and snaked a hand at my throat as Shorty closed in. I grabbed the hand, gave a yank, and kicked Shorty in the belly. Big-ears' head hit the door frame with a satisfying smash and Shorty sat down with a grunt. Big-ears crawled painfully out his side of the car and Shorty stared stupidly at the ground between his knees. I twisted at the car door, cursing myself for not having a gun.

"You hadn't ought to of done that, Mac." Big-ears came around the rear of the car, rubbing his head.

I started for him and stopped at the sight of the .45 in his right fist.

"All we wanted was to have a little talk with you. Get up, Shorty," he said patiently.

Shorty got to his feet, grunted and rushed at me.

"Hold it," said Big-ears. "We will go into the cane field and make a little conversation." He gestured toward the dense eight-foot sugar cane.

I looked up and down the straight stretch of highway. There wasn't a car in sight and none had passed since we stopped. Big-ears watched me, smiled sadly and wagged the big gun in the direction of the field. I went.

I pushed about twenty-five yards through the thick cane and Big-ears called a halt.

"We just wanted to talk peaceful, Mac. We wanted to ask you a little favor."

"Why, certainly. Anything at all," I said generously.

"We're bringing you the word, Mac: stick to your crooked divorce racket and leave killings to the cops."

Ordinarily, I have better sense. I said: "Put that big gun away before you hurt yourself, jughead. You and your comic friend couldn't scare a bad case of hiccoughs."

Big-ears stepped back. "We don't want to scare anybody. We just think you're going to listen to reason. Take him, Shorty!"

I whirled in time to catch Shorty's right square in the midriff. I doubled over trying to vomit and my face ran into a pile driver. I straightened without any effort on my part and the pile driver landed in my stomach again and I went down. I wanted to stay down. A heel ground into the side of my face. Through the haze a hand reached for my throat and I saw Shorty's twisted, sweating face floating above it. I grabbed the hand blindly and pulled him down. I slid out from under, rolled on top of him and pushed up on the arm with everything I had. I heard the bone snap and Shorty scream and then the toe of a size twelve boot crashed into my temple. It didn't feel any worse than being bashed on top of the head with a pickaxe.

Sleep seemed very important to me.

THROUGH the tall tops of the cane, stars twinkled in rhythm to the throbbing in my head. I remembered where I was and decided it would be a good idea to lie here until they harvested the cane. I could spend a week walking in circles within a few yards of the road and never see it. Besides, I wasn't feeling very well.

A heavy truck rumbled by on my left. I got up and limped in the direction of the sound. The car was where I had left it and there was no sign of Big-ears or Shorty. I climbed in and headed for a

hot bath and some adhesive tape. My face felt as though it had been over-matched with a meat grinder.

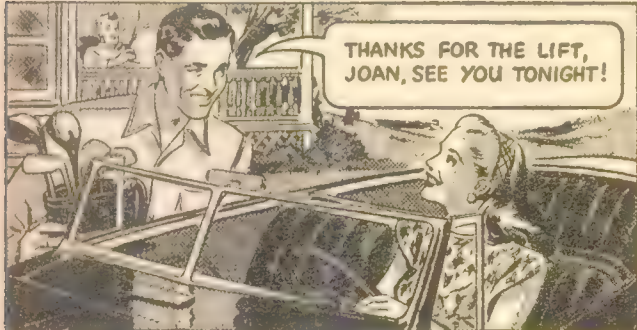
The broadcast was under way when I arrived at the station and the big *Studio-A* was packed with a grinning audience seated on folding chairs. Mac-Avoy was in the control room and the four guest stars were seated at a long table at the far end of the studio. Watson Hardy sat at a small table on the left, wisecracking in his rapid-fire, high-pitched voice.

I looked the guest stars over. Margo was wearing Chinese pajamas; wide black velvet trousers, pink brocade coat that flared stiffly at the hips, long earrings and a black velvet turban effect on her blonde hair. Fred Fisher, the correspondent, was a big, jolly, gross-looking man with unruly blond hair. He was wearing gray flannels, a corn-colored sport shirt and a horse blanket sport

coat. He rarely took his eyes off Margo, even when he was answering questions. Paul Cooper sat upright and casual in a white dinner jacket. I eyed it enviously and made a mental note to find out the name of his tailor. The fourth member of the quartet, Professor Snowden, was a bright little woman in her sixties. Her humor was dry and witty and she was having the time of her life. When she wanted to answer a question her eyes popped, her lips pursed and she waved her hand as energetically as any fifth grader.

I saw that Hardy had splurged on promotion. Everybody on the program was wearing an expensive, fragrant, white ginger *lei*. Even the members of the studio audience had each been handed a three-strand *pikake lei*. I spotted Lieutenant Chun in the crowd of standees and moved over beside him. He stared at my face.

TOM CLICKS ON VACATIONS-NOW!

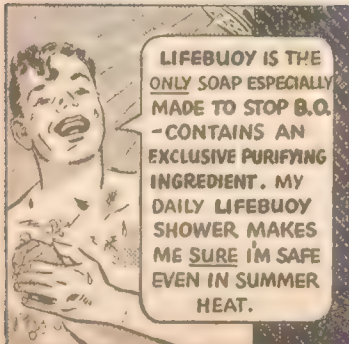


THANKS FOR THE LIFT, JOAN, SEE YOU TONIGHT!



SOME LUCK-MEETING A GIRL LIKE JOAN AND HAVING HER LIKE YOU!

SURE IS BETTER THAN LAST VACATION! I HADN'T CAUGHT ON TO LIFEBOUY THEN...

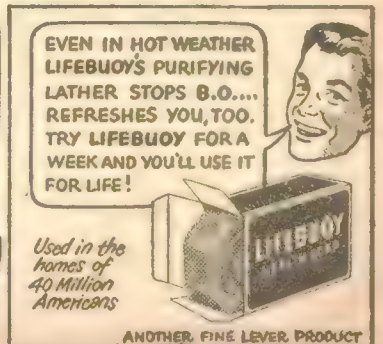


LIFEBOUY IS THE ONLY SOAP ESPECIALLY MADE TO STOP B.O. -CONTAINS AN EXCLUSIVE PURIFYING INGREDIENT. MY DAILY LIFEBOUY SHOWER MAKES ME SURE I'M SAFE EVEN IN SUMMER HEAT.



PROMISE TO WRITE ME, JOAN?

YOU'RE THE NICEST MAN I KNOW, TOM- OF COURSE I PROMISE!



EVEN IN HOT WEATHER LIFEBOUY'S PURIFYING LATHER STOPS B.O.... REFRESHES YOU, TOO. TRY LIFEBOUY FOR A WEEK AND YOU'LL USE IT FOR LIFE!

Used in the homes of 40 Million Americans

ANOTHER FINE LEVER PRODUCT

"Where you been?" he whispered. "Diving on the reef?"

"Doing your work for you," I whispered back. "Anything new?"

"So far, we make Weir short almost three thousand in his accounts."

I leered at him. "Is that all you got, Lieutenant?"

He leered right back. "Merriam's Lincoln was parked in front of the studio after eight o'clock last night. Cop on the beat identified it."

I bit my sore lip and winced. I remembered pulling in behind a departing Lincoln last night.

Now I remembered it.

Chun said: "We're going to have a session in Hardy's office after the broadcast. You want to sit in?"

"What do *you* think? Have you seen Merriam around?"

"Back in Hardy's office with Mrs. Hardy. They're listening on the radio in there."

I eased through the crowd, went out to the front entrance and spoke long and repetitiously to Nixon, the cop stationed at the door. Then I went back to wait with my client and Mrs. Hardy.

We crowded into Hardy's office—MacAvoy, Helen and Watson Hardy, Chun, Cooper, Margo and Robert Merriam. Hardy grabbed off the place of honor behind his desk and waved us all to seats.

"Well, here we are," he intoned, "a council of war to get at the facts, to pool our resources—" He stopped abruptly when he saw Chun eyeing him clinically. "Ah, perhaps you'd better take over, Lieutenant, now that we're all here."

Chun thrust his hands down in his pockets and allowed his eyes to run over the watchful, guarded faces around the room.

"Three of you," he began quietly, "acting without knowledge of each other's efforts, have exerted what influence

you could to kill publicity in this case and to have the police investigation follow any lead that would take it away from the group here tonight. Those three are Mr. Merriam, Mr. Cooper and Mr. Hardy.

"This is interesting because in the past twenty-four hours I have uncovered what *could be* a motive for nearly everybody here. In fact, there are so many near-motives that I got you all here tonight to take it up from another angle. I want to warn you, however," his voice grew deceptively gentle, "if I don't get what I want, I'm going to dig back into the lives of every one of you from the day you were born. And that goes for the three gentlemen whose names I have mentioned."

He bowed politely in their direction and turned to Rex MacAvoy.

"How soon did you leave after Weir relieved you?"

Perspiration stood out on MacAvoy's forehead. "About two minutes, sir."

"And you say you didn't see anybody?"

"No, sir, I swear it."

Chun turned to Merriam. "Then I guess you got here after MacAvoy left the studio."

Eyes turned on Merriam who straightened tiredly. "Undoubtedly, I did."

Chun's face was impassive. "You want to tell the story in your own words, Mr. Merriam?"

"Perhaps that would be best." He studiously ignored Margo who was watching him curiously.

"I came to see Mr. Weir on a personal matter and I wanted to see him alone. As I started to get out of the car, I saw a man and a woman come down the steps. I sat back and waited until they vanished down the street. I didn't recognize them but I was too concerned with avoiding their scrutiny to observe very closely. When they were gone, I entered

the building and walked down the corridor to where Mr. Weir was broadcasting. I found him—dead. When I saw there was nothing I could do, I left the building as quickly as possible with the hope that no one saw me. As I said, my reason for wanting to see Mr. Weir was personal and I had no desire to have to explain it. I understand now that a policeman saw my car parked in front of the building." He smiled grimly. "I realize, of course, that the story of a mysterious unidentified couple is an unlikely one, but it happens to be the truth."

I looked at my watch and eased over to Hardy's desk. The motion attracted Chun's attention and he asked quietly: "You like it?"

I nodded. "That couple was the killer and Miss Gardas."

He examined me thoughtfully and I fought against the temptation to look at my watch again. "Mrs. Merriam?" he asked.

I LOOKED at Margo and she looked at me and I wasn't sure of anything. I lit a cigarette, puffed at it too forcefully, stared at its lighted end judiciously and wondered what I was going to say next. Then the phone rang. Chun and Hardy reached for it and I got it.

Nixon, out at the receptionist's desk, said: "Mr. Ford?"

"Yes."

"Is it all right to tell Chun that you told me to do this?"

"Sure, he's right here now." I handed the phone to Chun.

The room was silent as he listened. I watched the tense and uneasy faces until Chun said: "O. K., I got it. Thanks." He hung up and looked at me.

"I didn't get the details about that beating you took."

I shrugged.

"He says they got the two men who did it."

"How did they do that?" I asked innocently.

"Found the sedan. It was a hot car and all the fingerprints had been wiped off the doors and steering wheel."

"Then how did they get the guys?"

"Like you guessed they would—a right thumbprint on the rearview mirror. The big fellow's thumb matched it and the short one had a cracked shoulder joint."

"Who were they?"

"He says they work for Dray's."

We both turned on Cooper. He got a leather cigarette case from his inside coat pocket, lit a cigarette calmly with a gold Dunhill lighter. "Why, in heaven's name, should two of Dray's employes want to give Ford a beating?"

"I was just going to ask you that," Chun said softly.

"What were the names of those two men, Lieutenant?"

"He didn't give the names."

"Will you call back and get them for me?" He frowned. "Perhaps it was a private grudge. Perhaps Mr. Ford can explain why he was beaten up?"

"I think I can," I said. "Somebody thought there was enough pressure on to make the police stay away from the facts. He didn't want me nosing around on the outside, so he had those two goons give me the treatment. I'm talking about you."

Cooper stared at me blankly. "You do carry your personal dislikes to extremes, don't you?"

I said to Merriam: "This is going to hurt but it's got to come out."

He inclined his head resignedly and I turned to Chun.

"Weir was a clever weakling and a petty crook—the kind of person who would use a frame or blackmail to get what he wanted. He fell for Mrs. Mer-

riam. But Mrs. Merriam had set her sights on Cooper and there is evidence that she intended to marry him. Cooper, on the other hand, had different ideas. He enjoyed playing around with Margo and she was useful and attractive to him. He's a good businessman and he made a lot of nice contacts through the dashing Mrs. Robert Merriam.

"Cooper's aim was to win friends and influence people and stay in business," I went on. "He knew he wouldn't get anything but antagonism and bad publicity if he broke up the home of a well-known and well-liked man. And all he'd have to show for it would be a cute little number with no money and few real friends. I think he counted the cost and decided against it.

"Neither of them figured on Weir. Weir had something on Cooper—maybe on both of them. He asked Margo to stop seeing Cooper and she told him to go roll his hoop. So he tried to blackmail Cooper. The irony is that Cooper was perfectly willing to give Margo up but it was something that couldn't be done overnight—not with Margo—and Cooper couldn't or wouldn't stoop to explain that to Weir.

"Last night Weir saw Margo for a showdown and didn't get anywhere. When he got back to the station, he telephoned Cooper and Cooper came over to the station to silence him one way or another. Unfortunately for herself, Miriam Gardas picked last night to come back to the station. She heard the shot from her office and came running. Why Cooper took her out to Black Point, I don't know, unless she said something that made Cooper suspect she knew about the blackmail. Instead of killing her here, he took her away to find out whatever it was. Whether he found out or not, doesn't matter. He couldn't let her live under any circumstances."

Chun shook his head.

I said: "Too many holes?"

He shrugged and turned to Cooper.

Cooper ducked out his cigarette elaborately and said: "I suppose your brilliant deductions have shown you how I could be in two places at the same time?"

"You weren't," I said bluntly.

"Correct. As you so elegantly phrased it this morning, Mr. Ford, 'A dame can alibi me.'"

"You're going to need her."

He smiled rigidly.

Margo adjusted a cigarette in the long holder without looking up. "Paul was with me. Or rather, I was with him at his apartment."

"Are you satisfied?" Cooper snarled. "It was a harmless evening," he apologized. "We played records and had drinks. There would be no reason to bring it up at all—"

"But you were late, Paul." Margo waved the long holder and peered, brighteyed, through the curling smoke. "When no one answered the bell, I went back to the car and waited. Almost half an hour." She paused for effect. "I watched you go in. Then I gave you five minutes and followed you upstairs. That's how I happened to notice that both the dashboard clock and my wristwatch agreed on the time—five minutes to nine."

COOPER stared fixedly at Margo. He got out the leather case and selected a cigarette without looking at it. Somehow, he seemed to be enjoying the situation. He replaced the case and when his hand came into view it was holding a snub-nosed Colt Banker's Special. I remembered academically that they came in two calibers, .22 and .38, and you couldn't tell them apart from a distance. The thought struck me that I didn't have to guess which caliber this one was.

Cooper coughed loudly and artificially.

The door to the lavatory swung open and Big-ears, his sad smile, and his .45 moved into the room. Shorty followed with a mate to the .45 in his good hand. I noticed with satisfaction that his other arm was taped to his body. The pair fanned out and Cooper sidled over and locked the corridor door.

"That phone call was a rather neat trick, Lieutenant. If I hadn't heard them climbing through the window, I would have been tempted to believe you." He grinned at me. "I suspect Ford had a hand in that little strategy. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't be surprised to find your guess was a good one—that Jonesy *did* forget to wipe that rear-view mirror. What about it, Jonesy?"

Jonesy of the big ears shook his head sadly. "I wouldn't be surprised myself, Mr. Cooper."

Cooper's face was drawn. "I didn't want to kill Weir, though I probably deserve a vote of thanks for performing that public service. I am extremely sorry about Miss Gardas but as Ford surmised, Weir had confided in her and there was nothing else I could do. Unfortunately, there is a law against it and thanks again to Mr. Ford, my position in Honolulu is, ah, untenable. I intend to retire to the more hospitable shores of the mainland and try a fresh start.

"Now, we are going to exit through that lavatory window and get into the rear of the panel truck parked outside. Then we're going to make a quick trip across the Island to where you will all be hidden for a few days."

Helen Hardy gasped and Cooper looked at her apologetically.

"You will have to do without food for two or three days but it won't do you any real harm. I promise that as soon as we are safe I will see to it that word gets back telling the authorities where you

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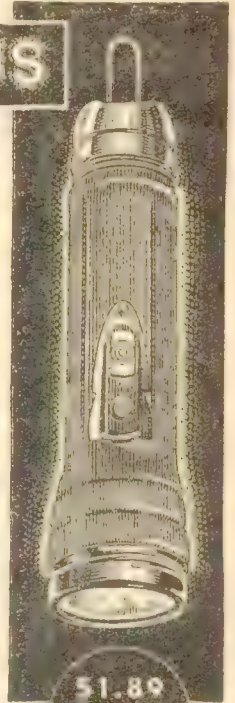
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are hidden. I'm sorry we can't treat you any better but you all understand our circumstances. If you come along quietly, you will not be mistreated in any way."

"Correction, boss," Shorty spoke up, looking at me. "It's gonna be kind of lonely holed up on the Coast and I want some happy thoughts to keep me company." He grinned wickedly and gestured at his broken shoulder. "I'm gonna give the guy who did this something to remember me by."

Cooper shrugged. "Jonesy, climb out and open the truck. And Kain, you get Lieutenant Chun's gun and search Mr. Ford."

Jonesy turned toward the lavatory and Shorty started for Chun. Suddenly there was a nasty, coughing sound. I didn't see anything but I smelled the faint aroma of cordite. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Cooper start to sag as I leaped. I smashed my left fist into Shorty's injured shoulder and grabbed for his gun with my right. He let out a groan and his fingers loosened on the gun. I muffed it and it slipped to the floor.

I dove for it as a big gun exploded into action but no slugs tore into my back. Shorty reeled against the wall, gripping his injured shoulder. I clouted him on the jaw with the gun butt and he went down. I whirled in time to watch Jonesy slide slowly down the door frame with a faintly annoyed look on his face. Cooper was spread-eagled on the floor, clawing at it feebly. Chun holstered his Police Positive and I looked at Margo Merriam.

She was sitting in the same position, leaning forward slightly, the long cigarette holder pointing toward the ceiling. Her right hand rested firmly on the open evening bag in her lap and gripped a pearl-handled .25 automatic. The gun angled down at Cooper and she was still

pulling the trigger convulsively. She was wearing a stiff smile and something that wasn't nice glittered in her eyes. I went over and took the gun away from her and laid it on the desk.

Cooper held onto life for almost eight hours before his stomach gave up trying to digest those six lead pills. Before he died he told us that most of what we guessed had been correct.

The apartment manager of the building in which Cooper lived was a woman. Weir had turned on the charm and told her that he was going to play a practical joke on Cooper. What he had done was to introduce a recorder and a mike into Cooper's apartment. Margo had visited Cooper that night and, apparently, it had been a very warm evening for December.

On the night of his death, Frank Weir had called Cooper and played the record for him over the phone. Cooper went to the station immediately afterwards. Weir had boasted to Miriam Gardas of what he had done and Cooper was lucky enough to destroy Weir, the record and Miss Gardas all within the same half hour—if you can call it lucky.

Jonesy died in Hardy's office and Shorty Kain drew twenty years.

Nothing happened to Margo, naturally. She fired in self-defense at a murderer-kidnaper. Who could argue about that? I wish I could say that the Merriams lived together happily ever after.

They are still married and living together, period.

After things quieted down, I got a couple of telephone calls from Margo. But I have lived long enough to know when I am well off. I haven't seen her since, though I did find out one thing from her—the name of Cooper's tailor. I like my new white dinner jacket. I'll say that for Cooper, he had very good taste—about clothes.

*I was squeezing the trigger
before he knew what happened.*



LICENSE TO KILL

By

NORMAN A. DANIELS

There's one breed of crooks that can't afford to kill off its victims, for the old adage still stands: No golden omelets from a gone goose.

LEON HARWOOD had closely-set, light blue eyes. His hair was soft and curly enough so he tried to keep it plastered down. He was no gay caballero, but no dope either. On his feet he stood about six-two. He wasn't

on his feet now. He was stretched across the rug of his living room floor and those blue eyes of his were not quite as bright as they'd been a few hours before when he'd been in my office.

The window through which I peered wasn't too clean and the box I stood on was rickety enough to be groaning under my hundred and eighty. I had seen enough. I got down and put the box back in the garage. I didn't intend to yell cop. Not right then, though my private detective license might be at stake. The police sort of like to know when somebody has been bumped.

In this particular case I didn't want them to know until I'd gone a bit further. That meant a fast trip, via my coupe, to the Gayety Theatre just off Broadway. I was a little late—about an hour. The hardboiled, bald-headed man at the stage door told me Miss Kit Maxon had gone home and should be snug in bed by now. He said it with a leer.

I WENT to her apartment hotel, one of those fancy places with an effeminate night clerk. He didn't like me. That kind never do. I'm a dumpy guy with a belly I feed too much beer and too much food. I'm doggone near bald and no beauty. I get around though and make a living. I rolled a five dollar bill around the fountain pen sticking out of the desk well.

It found out for me that Miss Kit Maxon hadn't come home yet and that she was at the Club Farrell. That's another fancy joint run by an Italian named Satelli who thinks a club has more swank if it's graced by an Irish name.

I made it to the club in fifteen minutes flat, which took some finagling of traffic because Kit Maxon lived way downtown and the club was in the bright

light belt. I parked between two chauffeur-driven buggies and got glared at by their drivers. I passed the doorman with a nod I hoped was casual and polite. He didn't try to stop me. Maybe the club needed more business.

The hat check girl nailed me cold. I surrendered my hat and light coat to be held for ransom and then I tailed a headwaiter in the general direction of the men's john. I hadn't flashed him anything green and he was taking no chances on giving me a good table and not getting paid for it.

I veered to the left when we were halfway across the floor. I saw Kit Maxon sitting at a table one layer from being ringside. She had a glass of something that looked like white mule in one hand and a cigarette stuck in the end of a foot long ivory holder.

She was all in white too. Her hair was corn yellow and it was the McCoy. Peroxide had nothing to do with it.

She was too old and hard looking to be cute, but I thought she might have been one day in the fairly recent past. She couldn't sing worth a hoot and her dancing was confined to steps that resembled a shuffle-off, but she was loaded with personality and people fought to get tickets for her shows. Her teeth were beautifully capped and she liked to show them. She did now, as I stopped beside her table.

"My!" she exclaimed. "Are you what Harwood sent?"

I didn't mind. I was used to it, especially from women. I pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Harwood sent me. Name is Stacy Tucker. I don't look like much, but I'm a fireball. Has anything new developed?"

"No—did Harwood hear from them?"

"Yes. Now get this, Miss Maxon. As I understand things, you and Harwood

used to have a little affair. Hot enough so you wrote some steaming letters back and forth. Sexy junk that never meant much—or did it?"

Her amber-colored eyes were like ice. "You're a louse."

"For twenty-five bucks a day I can stand it," I told her. "Now, it seems, you're going to be married and so is Harwood. Your respective and soon-to-be better halves aren't the types who'd like to read what is in those letters. Harwood gave you his—the ones you wrote him—some time back. He believed the story that you had destroyed the ones he'd written you. But somebody got them and put them into perpetuity by photostatting each one. Whoever did that thinks they are worth some dough. Do you?"

"I'll never let a blackmailer get me. Not even once, Stacy. I couldn't afford to."

"Harwood didn't think that way. He paid off and now they should be looking to you to double the take."

She sipped at the drink. It wasn't white mule but white mint, and it gave her a breath like six types of mouthwash rolled into one mess.

Over the rim of the glass she said: "Harwood paid you. I'm not going to. I can take care of myself, thanks. You'd have me submit to those blackmailers. Harwood thinks he's very smart—very brainy. . ."

"Not any more he doesn't." I crooked my finger at a waiter and ordered bourbon.

Her eyes stroked my face, her beautiful teeth were showing. I thought she had an idea what I'd meant. But she said it anyway. "What do you mean by that crack?"

"His brains are kind of mixed up. With Bullets."

She winced. That was the only emo-

tion she showed, except in those eyes again. They were beginning to look haunted.

"You mean he-he's. . .?"

"He'll never be any deader. Now this is the situation as of the present moment. Harwood came to me for help. He was willing to pay off to get those letters, but he was afraid if he did, they'd simply tap him for more. So he came to me for advice. His date was at midnight—about half an hour ago—with the black-mailer agent. But Harwood was dead at ten o'clock. At least he didn't answer the phone."

"Perhaps they—came early." She finished the white mint in one swallow and frantically clawed the air to attract a waiter's attention. She was off the sissy stuff now. She ordered bourbon too—a double load of it.

"Nix," I told her. "Blackmailers are scrupulous about keeping appointments. Too many things can go wrong. Oh, they might case a joint or tail a man, but they wouldn't approach him until the time set. Whoever did it plunked him smack through the middle of the forehead."

She waited until the drink arrived. I noticed she hadn't ordered one for me. She kept tracing a series of short lines on the spotlessly white table cloth with long, blood-red fingernails. She practically snatched the drink out of the waiter's hairy paw, and raised the glass high.

"To Leon Harwood. He was a nice guy. They rarely came any better. I was a fool. I should have married him those years back when we were both young and didn't give a damn. I would have made a good wife."

"Maybe. But without the worries you've got now. You're slipping, Kit Maxon. You won't get many more juicy

parts. They do say you're getting too old and faded."

She threw back her head. "Take a good look, shamus. Do you see anything faded about me?"

I shook my head and offered her a polite grin. "Not under these lights, baby. They'd made an octogenarian look twenty-two. Want me to continue my spiel or should I just blow?"

"You can blow for all of me," she said.

I pushed my chair back. Instantly she changed her mind again. "No—wait. I want to hear it all. Do you have any idea who killed Harwood? Do you know where the letters are?"

"No, no and no, to each question respectively. My one hope of landing those guys is by sticking with you, Kit. Partly because Harwood paid me two hundred and fifty bucks to handle the deal and I failed him. I did my best, told him to go home and see nobody until I arrived. He was as worried about you as about himself so for the same two and a half C's I figured you were entitled to some protection. Besides, if those monkeys contact you, I'll have a lead."

"Bait, that's what you're making me. I don't like it."

I said, dryly: "You wouldn't like being dead either. Tell me how those letters were swiped."

SHE shrugged, proving those strapless gowns stay up anyway. I was interested in that. "Harwood sent them to me. I meant to burn them, but I wanted to read them over first. You might say—to recapture my youth. I put them in a desk drawer in my apartment. The next morning they were gone. So were mine."

I said: "Hmm—no signs of breaking and entering?"

"No—nothing."

"Somebody knew you had them, baby. I'll see you home and then try to find out. How much were they asking from you? Three grand, the same as from Harwood?"

"Yes—three thousand dollars."

"Then they're either small time punks or this was just the leader. With more demands to follow. Let's go home, baby. I don't like it in here . . ."

The big car moved away from the curb with hardly a whisper. It merged with traffic and Kit Maxon seemed to be doing a lot of heavy thinking so I stared out of the window and did my own. What I wanted to know—mainly—was whether or not Leon Harwood had been murdered by blackmailers. It seemed almost incredible because there is one breed of crook that can't afford to kill its victims. With them die the golden eggs. There'd been no signs of a fight in the room so Harwood apparently hadn't resisted, hadn't even known what was coming until too late.

I was still pondering those ideas when the car slowed for a red light and then lurched toward the curb. It was a clumsy move. Two men yanked open the rear door and started to get in. Kit screamed, but there weren't many to hear her. These residential East Side streets are apt to be lonely about one-thirty on a week night.

The one who tried to crowd in first was any average guy in size, but there was nothing average about his determination. Also he had a gun in his hand and as it started to come up, I plugged him. Ruining my coat to do it, but there was no time to get my hand out of my pocket with the .25 in it.

He howled, let go of his gun and sprang back. Things happened very fast after that. The driver twisted around and tried to swing a blackjack at me.

He missed and that was enough for him. He bounded out of the car and never stopped until he was out of sight.

The wounded man was taking the pavement fast, too, and the third one had dived head-first into a doorway. I told Kit to get a grip on herself, climb in to the front of the car and get us out of here. I saw a flash of silken clad leg as she obeyed.

The guy in the doorway saw her too and took a pot shot at us. He missed and I winged one of those tiny slugs in his direction. He must have recognized the small explosion of my pop-gun and sneered at it because he came out of the doorway and streaked down the street.

He was a wise guy. He knew very well that Annie Oakley couldn't have hit the Public Library at a hundred yards with a gun like that. I gave him a chance. I pride my self in doing that—when I'm not being shot at. He paid no attention to my yell. I pulled the .38 out of my shoulder clip and brought it down slowly. He was getting set to round a corner. I snapped one at him and it connected. He reeled to one side, hit a building wall

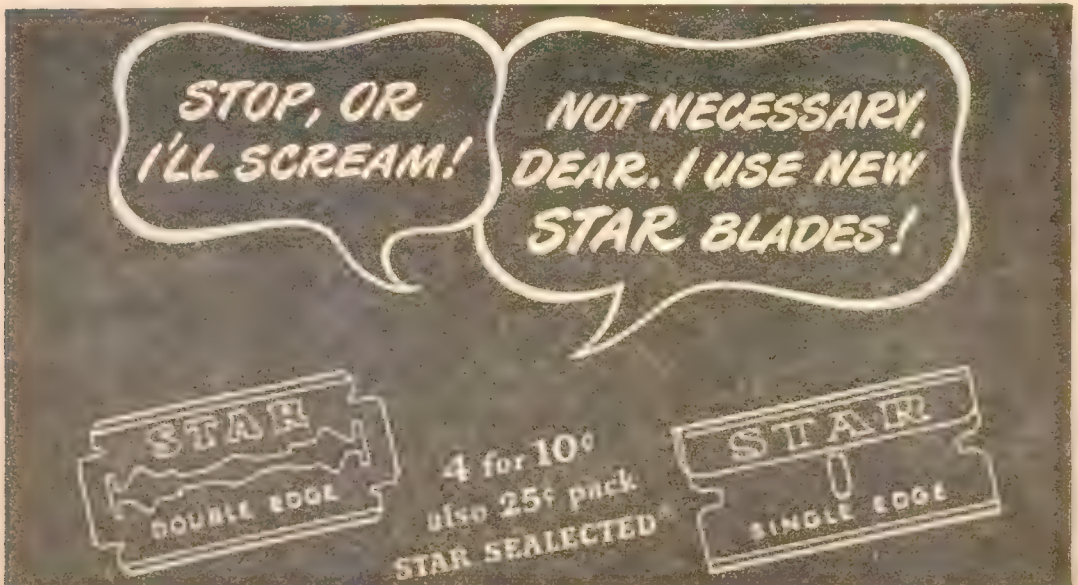
and started sliding all the way down it.

I called to Kit: "Drive over there where he is. We're going to take him ourselves—before the cops come."

She sent the car rolling down. I hopped off the running board, moved up to the guy carefully. Some of those punks have a habit of playing it dead and then snap shooting anybody who comes close. This one didn't. He was out like a light.

I dragged him over, hoisted him into the back of the car and then returned to pick up his hat and gun. Kit got away from there fast. We weren't bothered. Sleepy people in city apartments always think shots are backfiring. Most of the time such a noise is.

We took our wounded prisoner into Kit's building through the service door and up via the freight elevator. She punched the bell beside her door. A woman of about forty let us in. She was straight as a ramrod with glasses looped around her neck by a black silk cord. One of the super-efficient kind, though this one had a figure and knew it. Her name, Kit told me, was Rose Waverly and she was a secretary-companion.



She saw the blood and gave a little bleat of alarm that drew somebody else from inside the apartment. I wondered how many people would get to know about this. The man was one of those who are big in all directions without being fat. He had a shock of thick black hair that stood up as straight as a Prussian haircut and added inches to his already overwhelming height. His eyes were deep set. I'd seen eyes I liked better.

"What the hell. . .?" he demanded of everybody in general.

I didn't stop to explain. I merely suggested that I could use a piano mover and he helped me lug the wounded man into a bedroom to which Kit directed us. I opened my prisoner's shirt. He was wounded dangerously close to the upper part of the right lung. There was no bleeding at the mouth which was a good sign. I frisked him and took away a swivel knife. There was nothing else by which he could be identified.

I swung around to face the woman in black. "Sit down here, beside the bed. When he wakes up, let me know at once. Or if he begins wheezing, just sing out and I'll come running."

I TOOK Kit by one elbow and piloted her down a corridor and into the living room. It was put together like Kit—neatly, with plenty of sweep. Cool and comfortable to look at. I sat down on a chair that looked like a barrel cut in half.

"Now," the big lug appraised me with a glance and didn't seem worried, "what's this all about."

"Tony Weston." Kit waved a hand at him. "My fiance."

I took it from there. "My name is Tucker. I'm a private detective. If you want to know any more about my business, it will have to come from Kit. I'll

only say she did not hire me. That mug in the next room, with two others, jumped the car. Kit's driver must have been shanghaied someplace because the guy who drove kept his face forward and pulled in at the rendezvous point where he was to meet the others."

"But the other pair. . .?" Weston wanted to know.

"The driver hit the air. The second guy got his hand nicked when I shot him."

"You did that? A little guy like you?"

Kit stirred herself. "He told me he was a fireball. He wasn't lying, Tony. Now go home, will you? What's the sense in your getting involved?"

"I will not. I intend to stay. . ."

"Get out," she said wearily. "You'll be shocked at some of the things I have to tell Stacy Tucker. You won't want to marry me. . ."

"I'm beginning to think I almost made a bad error. Yes, I will go. Expect me tomorrow, Kit. We have some serious things to discuss."

She sighed when the door closed. "There goes my last chance to live like any decent human being. And don't cluck your tongue at me, Stacy. You think he'll be back? He comes from Boston. He thought I was a very nice girl even if I happened to be an actress." She picked up a cigarette and lit it. "I get so damned tired sometimes. . ."

"Kit," I said, "in those golden days of long ago—how many men did you correspond with—and write letters as you did Leon Harwood?"

She looked at me narrowly through the fog of smoke. "Are you trying to find out how old I am, by any chance? I guess there were a few. I thought one of them might—just might—be the one to give me a boost up the ladder. None of them were until I met Wendy Holmes.

He thought I was good . . . Stacy, you're not going to bring Holmes into this crazy mess?"

"Why not? It's a popular swimming pool. Everybody's diving in. Look, I want to talk with Rose Waverly before she faints dead away from watching a wounded man. Take over and send her out, will you, Kit?"

Rose Waverly looked a trifle pale around the corners of her mouth. The hand which brought those incredible glasses to her nose shook a bit. She was willing to talk.

"I've been with Kit since she first went on the stage—when Wendy Holmes gave her her first chance. Prior to that I know little of her although even then she had a horde of boy friends. Most of them serious. She was—well, very attractive then."

"She still is. How was the punk when you left him?"

"Groaning—coming out of it. I was glad you relieved me. I don't like these things. The police should be called."

"They will be when I get back. Stay with Kit and don't let anybody at all in."

I was half out of the door when Kit screamed. I did a sprint down the hall, nearly took a header on the waved floor and barged right past Kit into the room. The punk I'd plugged was a very good punk now. He was dead. I bent over him and saw some blood on the bottom of the pillow. I walked out of the room backwards and closed the door. I told Kit and Rose to behave and keep quiet. Then I went out on a mission I didn't like.

Wendell Holmes saw me at once, much to the disgust of his servant who tried to shoo me away. Holmes came into the room supported on a thick cane. He was about sixty and looked ninety. He wore

a light blue dressing gown and blue slippers that were built like sandals. I gave it to him cold.

"Harwood is dead—bumped off—because of some letters he wrote to Kit Maxon and some she wrote to him. It's the old, old blackmail stunt. I have to dig into Kit's past and I understand you gave her a chance which made her a stage star. Why did you do this? You were a big shot in those days. You had better material all around you than Kit could have hoped to be."

He smiled and I felt sorry for the guy. Age was the one thing he couldn't stop and he was game enough to try and take it in his stride.

"You're a shrewd person, Mr. Tucker. It is your impression that Kit wrote certain letters to Harwood with the intention of blackmailing him. You think possibly, she did that to me also and I kicked in to the tune of making her a star. And don't get me wrong, Mr. Tucker. She was a star. I made her one of the most famous and best liked actresses in this country. She wasn't a very good actress, but she had what it took to draw the crowds."

"Then it was a high-jack. She forced your hand and you gave her the chance because there was no other out?"

He closed his eyes and uttered a long sigh. "I really didn't mind. I always wanted to take someone without talent and see what I could do. It worked. I was as gratified as she. They were good days. I regret nothing. Kit was a lot of fun, high-spirited as they came. We had fun." He opened his eyes. They were dead looking. "See what I am now, Mr. Tucker."

I thought he was going to cry and I got out as gracefully as possible. There were things to do. It looked very much as if Kit had engineered the whole thing.

Back in those mellow days she'd deliberately set out to get as many men as possible into her trap. And she'd accomplished it, but then Wendy Holmes had come upon the scene and things changed. She didn't have to go in for blackmail. What she had always wanted was hers now, and for a kid without much talent she'd done well enough.

But she was slipping, on the verge of being a has-been. If she was broke, as many of her type usually are, perhaps she saw a chance to put her blackmail schemes to work after all these years. In fact, her chances were even better than in the old days because her victims were now married, middle-aged, settled and probably much more wealthy. They'd pay to stay out of scandal. That's the way Leon Harwood had reacted. The others would be the same. Maybe, if she'd gone through with her original blackmail scheme years ago, there might have been a murder. Over the years, murder had simply waited.

I TAXIED back to Kit's apartment house and went in the front way this time, much to the surprise and disgust of the nancy on the desk. Kit let me in. I poured myself a light drink—and then another. It was good. It settled on my stomach like steak and potatoes.

I said: "Rose, this is washed up. Go call the cops. The rest is up to them. Concealing blackmail is one thing, hiding murder something else. I've got my license to think about."

Kit said: "You know what this will do to me, Stacy?"

"You're on the verge of a complete bust anyway," I said indifferently. I could hear Rose dialing. I went over and lifted the lid of a lacquered cigarette box, took out a smoke and slipped my

little .25 on top of the rest of them. I sat down beside the table on which the box rested. Rose told me the cops were on their way.

They took their time about it, but I told Kit what I'd found out. Before I finished, Kit looked her age. She wanted a cigarette. I gave her one because I didn't want that toy gun found. She practically ate the cigarette.

"All right," she admitted, "I did begin laying the ground work for blackmail eighteen years ago. Why not? The suckers I selected had too much money and too few brains. But Holmes gave me a break. I clicked and—well that's all there is to it. I forgot all about those damned letters."

"Until you realized this was your last season and things might get tough from now on," I said without rancour. "It all fits, Kit. It won't make nice copy. . ."

The buzzer sounded. I got up. "These guys must have very flat feet," I said. "I could have sidestepped from the precinct to this building in half the time they took."

I opened the door and stepped back with a gun prodding my middle. It was a pretty ample middle, I thought. I should do something about it but then, it seemed these two punks were going to take care of it for me. They were the pair who'd gotten away after the shooting fiasco.

One was a sphinx and the other thought he was tough. They shoved me into a chair, but neither realized what chair I steered for. The taller of the two wanted to know where his brother was.

"He's dead in the bedroom down the hall. He died from the wound I ripped through him."

"Go look," the tall one ordered and his pal ambled out of the room and down the hall. I heard him open the door and

then start back. I let my hand rest on the lacquered cigarette box. The one with the gun and the wounded hand didn't pay much attention.

"Can I smoke?" I asked. "Or is that against the rules?"

He didn't say anything. I lifted the lid, got my hands on the little gun and I was squeezing the trigger before he knew what happened. He tumbled backwards onto a divan. That right hand of his wasn't going to be good for anything after this. I'd busted it with my first bullet and finished the job by shooting out part of his elbow.

I was running across the room as he fell. The smaller guy had seemed more dangerous to me and I wanted to meet him before he could get set. It worked too. He must have thought it was his pal who'd done the shooting and he had his own gun only half out of his pocket when he looked down the barrel of my pea shooter. I took away his rod, shoved him in front of me and we went into the room.

Before I'd crossed the threshold, a gun was being pushed against my ribs and a soft, feline voice was telling me to drop my gun. I did. That voice was deadly.

Rose Waverly said: "O. K., shamus, go over and sit down. Don't reach for a cigarette again. Mack—he killed Buck Jordan. He could have called a doctor."

Mack bent and picked up his pal's gun. Everybody makes a mistake. I

should have crippled that rod and every other one I got my hands on. I sat down before I was gunned down. Mack slapped me across the face with the muzzle of the Smith and Wesson. It drew blood and he liked that. His tall pal was still groaning and not too interested in what went on.

I said: "Be a sap. Go on and be a sap. Rose killed your pal. I told her to watch him and call a doctor if he showed any signs of going under. She shoved a pillow over his snoot and smothered him to death. If you don't believe me, go back and take another look. You can tell by the blueness of his face that he was smothered. And there is blood on the bottom of the pillow."

Mack didn't move. He watched me every moment. "Rose—how about that? His face was blue and it don't get that way if he croaked of a bullet."

"This man is stringing you along. That's all he has to offer—just wits. He'll talk you out of that gun if you're not careful. Mack, we've got to get out of here. Things have slipped."

I CHORTLED: "They sure have," and felt about much like chortling as a baby with a safety pin stick-him where no safety pin should be. "Rose found the letters and decided to cash in. Because if Kit was through, Rose would

(Continued on page 127)

HEADACHE

**UPSET
STOMACH**

**JUMPY
NERVES**

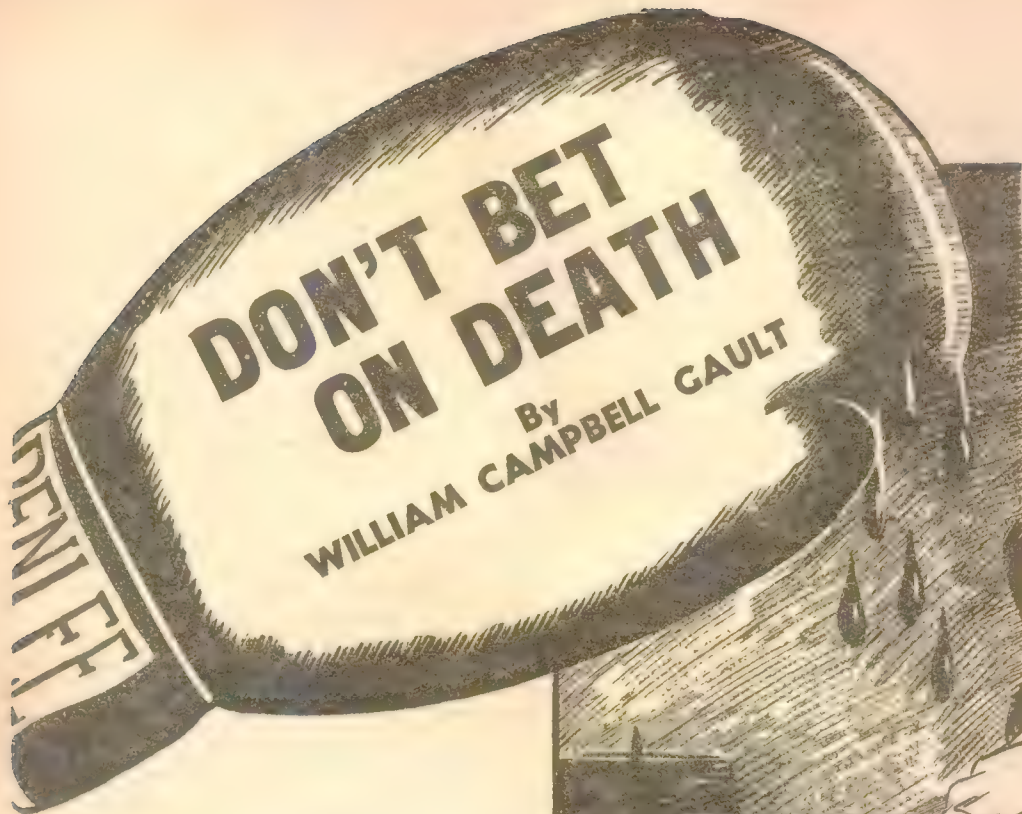


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IT WAS a Sunday morning and we were having a late breakfast, I remember. Ned was reading the entertainment page, and I was reading the sport section when the front door bell rang.

"Your turn," Ned said. "I answered it last."

"When was that?" I demanded. "Nobody's been here since day before yesterday."

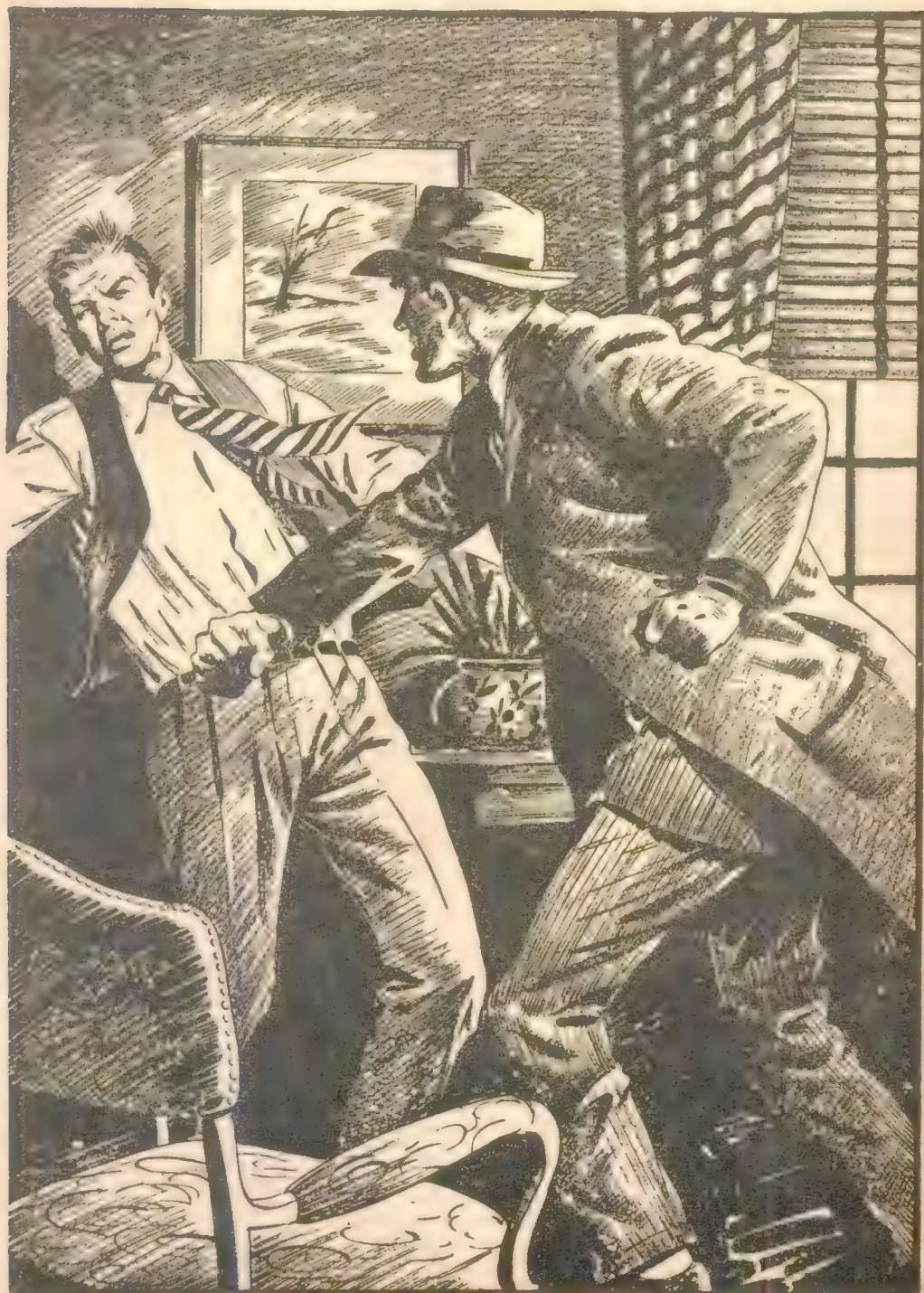
"That's when I answered it," he told me, and smiled as he went back to his reading. As I went through the doorway to the living room, Ned added: "It's probably one of your lady friends, anyway."

It wasn't, though. It was a thin and tall man wearing a gray suit and a



*I hit him with a haymaker
right, high on the jaw.*

Carol had laughed at everyone all her life—she never suspected a .22 would have the last laugh on her.



frown, an intelligent and virile looking gent. "Lieutenant Maltz," he said, "of Central Homicide."

I couldn't think of anything bright to say to that. He was studying me thoughtfully. "You're Cary Vaughn?"

I nodded. "Come in, Lieutenant. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

Which wasn't quite as stupid as it sounds. I get visits from the law, occasionally—cops who want tickets to sold-out fights and football games.

He came in. "Something's wrong, all right. I said I'm from *Homicide*, Vaughn."

"So . . .?" I said.

"So it's murder." He paused then, like a ham actor. "A girl named Carol Brenk was killed last night."

"Carol Brenk—?" I couldn't seem to get my breath. "You're not—why—" I felt my legs getting weak, and I sat down staring at him.

SOMETHING like a smile appeared on his face, though it wasn't really that. Just an ironic twist of his mouth. "You act surprised," he said. "Pretty close to you, was she?"

"We were engaged," I said. "You know that. Don't be so damned cute, Maltz. What happened?"

His face was rigid. "Watch your tongue, Mr. Vaughn. You're talking to an officer of the law."

"What happened?" I repeated.

He didn't answer that. Instead, he asked: "When was the last time you saw her?"

"Last night," I said. "You probably know that, too. I've known too many cops to be impressed, Lieutenant. I want to know what happened." I was leaning forward in my chair. I was about ready to pop him.

He was sitting on the davenport across from me, looking smug and official.

From the doorway, Ned said: "Something wrong, Cary?"

I couldn't answer him. I continued to stare at Maltz.

Maltz said: "You're Ned Orlow?"

Ned nodded. "I don't believe I know you, sir."

"You will," Maltz said. "I'm from Homicide, Mr. Orlow. A friend of yours was killed last night."

Ned looked at me. I said: "Carol."

Ned was staring at the lieutenant, now. "Carol? Carol Brenk was killed?"

"That's right. Hit you pretty hard, Orlow?"

Ned's voice was sharp. "You can cut out the humor, Lieutenant. I'd have been engaged to her myself if she hadn't preferred Cary. If you've got some business here, get to it or get the hell out."

Maltz half rose, his taut face ugly. Ned was glaring at him, making no move, but Ned's a very big, rough boy.

Maltz said: "For a man with a *record*, you've got a lot of lip, Orlow."

Ned was white, and he took a half step toward the lieutenant as I said: "Sit down, Ned. Take it easy, Lieutenant."

Ned stared at me as though I wasn't there, as though I was merely a distraction.

"Sit down," I repeated. "We're all civilized, I hope."

Ned seemed to shake himself. He went over to sit down in a chair near the window. He kept his gaze on the officer.

Maltz said: "I've got a job to do. It would be smart for both you boys to cooperate." His glance alternated between us, then settled on me. "What time did you leave Miss Brenk last night?"

"Around ten-thirty," I said. "She wasn't feeling well."

"You came right home after that?"

I shook my head. "I went to a friend's apartment to play cards. I didn't get

home until two o'clock this morning."

Maltz' eyes were speculative. "You quarreled with her, didn't you?"

"No," I said. "Don't try any traps, Lieutenant. You're just taking a shot in the dark there."

"Am I? Well, the people in the next apartment heard you quarreling. And they heard a noise, too, though it didn't sound like a gun at the time. It was sharp, but not loud. You see, Vaughn, it was a .22. A .22 doesn't make the kind of noise you'd expect from a gun, but it's a killing weapon. That's what they heard—at ten forty-five."

"At ten-forty," I said, "or very close to it, I was in my friend's apartment."

"You kept a close check on the time, didn't you? Habit of yours?"

I shook my head. "But I wanted to get the 10:45 sports report on the radio, and I turned in at my friend's place."

"Now isn't that a coincidence?" he said. "That's how her neighbors remembered the time, too. The husband wanted to get the sports report. I forget the name, you know, the people that live next to her, there at the front of the building—"

"Don't fish, Lieutenant," I said. "I don't know their name. You say Carol was—it was a .22?"

"That's right. Shot in the left temple from close range."

His gaze moved over to cover Ned,

still in the chair near the window. "How about you, Orlow?"

"What about me?"

"Where were *you* last night? Say—about ten forty-five."

Ned frowned. "I was on the Mill Road about that time. As a matter of fact, it must have been just about the time I was being pinched."

"Pinched?" Maltz's eyebrows went up.

"For speeding. For what that flatfoot called speeding, anyway. I was doing about forty when he picked me up."

"Motorcycle officer?"

Ned nodded. "Thin fellow. Sour."

"Ruxtell," Maltz identified him. "His only son was killed by a speeding car, Orlow, so maybe he's got a right to be sour. And the limit on that road is thirty-five."

"I can read," Ned said.

"I guess you both are bright enough to read," Maltz said, "and figure out alibis, too."

Anger flared in me, and I started to say something. But Maltz held up a hand. "O .K. It's a remark I didn't have to make." He reached into an inner pocket and brought out a paper. "I've brought along a warrant. And some men. We're going to go through this place very carefully."

He rose, went to the door, and out into the hall. When he came in again, there were two men with him, one in uniform.



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He gave them instructions, and then beckoned us out into the kitchen.

He asked us the rest of his questions in there, while the two men went through the apartment thoroughly. Then they came into the kitchen, to check that.

One of them was carrying my 32.

Maltz said: "Whose is that?"

"Mine," I said. "I've a permit for it."

"Sure," Maltz said. He laid it on the table.

Ned said: "I've an expensive camera and a wrist watch in there I want to see after you flat-foots leave. They'd better be there."

Maltz colored. "You're looking for trouble, Orlow. We can give you more trouble than you can handle."

I rose and went into the other room. I knew Ned hated cops, but it was a strange time, I thought, to be bricking with them. From the top shelf of the bookcase in the living room, the picture of Carol smiled at me.

SHOT with a .22 . . . I'd known a lot of girls. I'm in sports promotion, and pretty girls have publicity value. I'd always had one in tow when I stepped out evenings. Carol had been something else. We'd planned on marrying in the spring; we had a house picked out, and we'd been buying furniture.

I went to the kitchen door, and said: "If you don't want me any more, Maltz, I'm going out for a walk."

He looked at me and nodded. "O. K. We're about through, here."

Ned said: "Easy does it, Cary."

I didn't answer that. I put on a top-coat and went out.

Chill day, an early fall day. Football weather, I thought. Carol and I were going to see the Giants tangle with the Redskins this afternoon.

I don't know how long I walked, but I wound up in a bar on Fifty-third. It was a quiet spot, mostly table trade, but

I stood at the bar. When my legs began to weaken, my head was still clear. I took a cab from there and went home.

The apartment was empty—and too hot. The whiskey got to my head; I was asleep on the davenport within five minutes.

When I woke up, it was dark, and the apartment was still too hot. I went over to open the window.

On the sidewalk below, a girl stood looking up at this window. She was indistinctly lined by the street lamp, but there was enough light for me to see she was young and well dressed.

I snapped on the table lamp near the window.

She seemed to hesitate—and then she started to walk south. Somewhere, I'd seen her before. And then I remembered. I grabbed my coat and hurried out.

She was still walking south as I came out of the apartment building. She was about half a block away now. I caught her just as she reached the next corner.

She turned as my hurrying footsteps approached, and her voice sounded frightened. "Mr. Vaughn—"

"You came to see me, didn't you?" I asked her. "You're Alice Hargreave. You live across the hall from—Carol's apartment?"

She nodded. "I came to see you, but I didn't see any light, at first, and then when I saw it go on, I was frightened—"

"I was sleeping," I said. "I'd—been drinking."

She said nothing.

"Was it about— Did you come to see me because you know something about what happened to Carol?"

"I'm not sure I know anything," she said softly. "It was something I was afraid to tell the police. I don't know—" Her voice trailed off, and she stared at the traffic going by.

Ahead there was a neon sign adver-

tising The Waffle House and I indicated it with a nod of my head. "Let's have some coffee, and you can tell me about it."

It was seven o'clock, and I hadn't eaten since morning. But I wasn't sure I could get any food down though I meant to try.

Alice Hargreave was slim. She had light hair and a thin, interesting, intelligent face. Her clear blue eyes were clouded now with indecision.

She sat in the booth across from me after we'd ordered, trying to frame the words she'd brought me.

I said: "It isn't anything definite you have, is it? It's a suspicion, and you don't want to give me the wrong impression."

She shook her head. "It's something I *know*, but I'm not sure it matters, now. This whole—idea, this trip was probably senseless—"

I said gently: "Why don't you tell me what you came to tell me? Why don't you let me decide if it's senseless, or not?"

"All right." Her voice was husky. "She—she didn't love you."

I didn't say anything for seconds. Then I said: "You're crazy. What made you say a thing like that?"

"I shouldn't have said it. I realize that, now. It can't do any good, not now. I wanted to tell you before this, but it was none of my business." Her eyes were brimming with tears; she twisted her hands together on the table top. "There was a man who came to see her. He came often when you weren't there. I heard them talk about you in the hall. I—heard them *laugh* at you."

"That's enough," I said. "Don't say any more."

Her gaze was directed toward the top of the table; the hands were quiet. "A man named Bruce," she said, and the blue eyes lifted to meet mine.

"Bruce Regan?"

"I don't know. A big man with a mustache. He looks like a—like a racketeer. Very well dressed, loud voice."

I didn't say anything.

She asked: "Wasn't he in some kind of trouble? There was something in the papers about a man named Bruce Regan."

"He was in trouble," I said. "With the boxing commission. More than once. He's a gambler, and he's been mixed up with some doubtful fights." I shook my head. "I still don't believe Carol would—" I stopped as the waitress brought our sandwiches and coffee.

"One night," she said, "when I was coming home from work, I met them in the hall. They were laughing. He said: 'If Vaughn ever saw us together, baby, we'd both be cooked.' And she said: 'What Cary doesn't know can't possibly hurt him, can it?' I wanted to see you then. I wanted to tell you about it."

"Why?" I asked. "Why should it concern you?" There was a pounding pain at the back of my head; my voice was sharp. "It doesn't make sense . . . It's . . ."

"I wanted to tell you," she said, "because I knew how you felt about her. And I talked to her from time to time. She invited me over a few nights. Any woman could tell what she—" She stopped, her mouth tight.

"I've known all kinds of women," I said. "I should know a phoney when I see one. I—"

There was some sharpness in her voice now. "Yes, I know. You're a regular ladies' man. No man is easier to fool than one of those. And it wasn't any of my business. But I had to tell someone. I'm not any braver than anyone else; I couldn't tell the police about a man as—as frightening as Bruce Regan."

"I can," I said, "and I will."

"All right." She sipped her coffee. Her eyes avoided mine. "You can do just

exactly what you think best, of course."

"I won't mention your name."

She didn't say anything. She bit into her sandwich and her eyes continued to avoid mine.

I realized I'd treated her badly, and said: "I'm sorry for the way I've talked. But you hit me pretty hard."

"I think I've hurt your ego as much as your heart," she said.

I didn't answer that. *What Cary doesn't know can't hurt him, can it?* It could, and had, even after she was dead.

THE waitress interrupted my reverie. "Anything else? Some dessert, perhaps?"

I looked questioningly at Alice Hargrave. "Some ice cream," she said.

"And you, sir?"

"Just some more coffee," I told her.

We finished in silence and then she was fumbling in her purse for a cigarette. I offered her one of mine, and she said, "Thank you", still not meeting my gaze.

I held a light for her; she concentrated on that.

"I'll get a cab for you," I said. "Don't be afraid of Bruce Regan. I'll take care of him."

She drew her breath in sharply. "You're not—"

"I'm just going to look him up and have a talk with him. If I'm in the mood, I might work him over a little." I paused. "I don't like to be laughed at."

"It *was* your ego, then," she said. "And now you're all muscle. You're the Cary Vaughn who used to play tackle for the Bears. You're going to get your revenge. What possible good do you think that will do? What's to be gained by violence?"

Only a part of her tirade came through. "How do you know I played tackle for the Bears?"

"I lived in Chicago then," she said. "I saw all the Bear home games. What

a raging madman you were. I thought you were different, now."

"That's the way George Halas likes his tackles," I said, and found a little warmth somewhere for my voice. "I am different, now, Alice. But you wouldn't want me to take this lying down, would you? Not a Chicago Bear tackle?" I managed a smile.

"It's no affair of mine," she said. "I'm through worrying about you, Cary Vaughn."

"Worrying about me—?"

"That's right. At Northwestern and when you were with the Bears, that time in the Minnesota game, and when the Packers broke your arm, and—" She broke off to glare at me. "All right, laugh, why don't you? It's funny, isn't it? Why don't you laugh?"

"I don't see anything funny," I answered.

"Don't you? Well, I do. Because I was just a silly girl, then, and I can look back on it and laugh. Other girls had their movie stars, and their crooners, and—" The eyes were brimming again.

"You cry too much," I said. "It that why you—I mean, you lived right across the hall from Carol, and—"

"*That*," she said firmly, "was just a coincidence, Mr. Vaughn. I'd almost forgotten you when I came to this town. I have all kinds of *civilized* friends, now, Mr. Vaughn. Men who can read and take me to plays and aren't always swinging at somebody."

"Practically everybody at Northwestern can read," I told her, "and they have a fine dramatic school there and I haven't swung at anybody for a long, long time."

"Really—" she said.

"And something else," I went on. "My efforts at right tackle helped to get me through Northwestern. My reputation there got me the job with the Bears, a damned sight better job than the rest of

the Business Ad majors got. The money I made with the Bears set me up in this town. And if you'll pardon a little smugness, I think I'm sitting right pretty for a gent just thirty-three years old."

"I'm sure you are," she said. "Would you get the cab, now, please?"

Her face was blank, the blue eyes cool. I went out and got the cab. She was waiting in the doorway when I came back. The blue eyes met mine, and she said: "Good-bye, Mr. Vaughn. Good luck with Mr. Regan."

I watched the cab drive off, and then went back in to pay my bill.

Outside the chill of the night got through to me as I walked aimlessly north. She was right; violence would solve nothing. If Bruce Regan had been close to Carol, the police should know it. If they'd been laughing at me, I'm just as soon nobody knew it. She'd made sense, all right. Only the anger was still strong in me, and the memory of Carol vivid.

I was in front of my apartment building now, and there were light on, up there. I turned in.

Ned was waiting for me in the open doorway. "Where the hell have you been?" he asked. "I've been looking all over town for you."

"Something come up?"

"No, but I was worried about you. You looked so damned reckless when you left here."

"I was," I said. "I've been home since then, and out to eat. Hear anything new on what—happened?"

"They've picked up Bruce Regan," he said. "They've got him down at headquarters."

"They're going to indict *him*?"

"I doubt it like hell," Ned said. "They know he used to—visit Carol from time to time, but he'll probably have a cast iron alibi." He put a hand on my shoulder. "I was down there with Maltz

and I heard some of Regan's story. He must have seen Carol quite a lot."

I shrugged. "Could be. Maltz pull you in, after I left?"

His smile was tight. "Yup. I got lippy. Ever since that three months I sat, I can't stomach cops."

Ned had been caught in a high-wheeling poker game and had the misfortune to run into a rough judge. Instead of the usual fine, he'd drawn ninety days.

I said: "I was going to see this Regan myself. I guess the law beat me to it."

Ned said: "You—knew about him and—Carol, then?"

"Just rumors," I said. "I never figured him for a Don Juan, but maybe I was wrong."

"He's shaved off his mustache," Ned said. "Maybe that's what did it. Though I still can't see him as a lady killer." Then, realizing his unfortunate choice of words, he flushed.

"I can," I said. "I can figure him in both meanings."

I headed for the bathroom. I thought a good hot shower might help to put me to sleep tonight. I left the door open as I undressed.

Ned said: "Remember that early appointment with Girard's manager, Cary. He's leaving town at nine-thirty, and it's the last chance you'll have for a month."

"You take care of it," I said. "I'm going to see Maltz in the morning."

"O.K.," he said doubtfully. "You're willing to let Buster fight this Girard then?"

"Willing and eager," I said. "Guys like Dan Girard were made for Buster. And it's a title shot after that, Ned. We'll have the middleweight champ of the world in the stable."

Ned came to the open bathroom door. "Cary—you're not going to tangle with this Bruce Regan, are you? He's got some rough friends in this town, kid."

"I doubt if I'll tangle with anybody," I answered. "I just want to get the story from Maltz."

He grinned. "Easy does it, though, huh?"

"Sure," I said.

"And about this Girard deal. The usual cut for Buster?"

"If you can chisel it. But shade it if you have to. The important thing is to get the fight. It's the last step to the crown for both of them. Let Girard's noodle understand that. We can't get to the crown without fighting Girard, maybe, but neither can his boy get there without fighting Buster. That's the tune you want to play tomorrow morning."

"O. K." he said. "I'll take my fiddle, and play it over and over. And you watch your language around Maltz. He can be nasty. He even cooled me down."

"I'll be careful," I promised.

IT WAS a restless night. I couldn't get the memory of Carol out of my mind. It had been a good year for me. I had a piece of the fastest welter in the game and owned the coming middleweight champ of the world. I'd picked him up young and cheaply, and now he was going to pay off in bundles. I had a good sized share of the Sports Bowl, and the Bowl was busy four nights a week. This had been a Midas year, had set me up solidly for the future. But Carol had been a part of that future—until now.

I could understand that Regan's interest in her was something more than romantic; I'd bought a couple of contracts for respectable sugar that he'd been trying to pick up for peanuts. I'd beat him to the draw in backing the new Sports Bowl. Or rather, he'd beat himself, there. While he was figuring a way to chisel in without too much investment, I'd plunked a sizable wad of cash down and financed the rest to gents who

had something besides a purely financial interest in sports.

Angle-shooters like Regan were getting pinched more and more as real sports lovers with moola crowded into the game. Which still didn't make any sense out of Carol's death. Well, maybe Maltz would have some kind of lead by now. . . .

I got there early enough to catch him next morning. He was in a small room that served as his office, on the main floor at headquarters.

He was talking to a uniformed patrolman; I waited until he'd finished, and the patrolman left the room. Then Maltz swiveled in his chair to face me.

"I wanted to find out about Bruce Regan," I said.

"Did you?"

"He's still here?"

Maltz shook his head slowly. "We released him last night. He's covered just like the rest of you."

"Nothing new?"

"Nothing new. And if there was, what makes it your business?"

My temper began to stir, and I waited until I could speak evenly. "Nothing, I suppose. Only—she was my girl and—"

"Your girl? And maybe Regan's too. And maybe some other guy's we haven't met and won't meet."

"You sound as though the case is closed," I said.

"There're only twenty-four hours in a day," he answered, "and seven days in a week. People are constantly getting killed in this town."

I said nothing.

"Double-talk and smart talk, that's what I've been getting in this case. And crack-proof alibis. I checked yours and one of the boys you were playing bridge with is an assistant D. A. Orlow's got a cop to back him up, and Regan's got about fifteen assorted characters who saw him at the Rainbow Cabin. You

know where the Rainbow Cabin is?"

I shook my head.

"It's about thirty-five miles from here," Maltz said, "and he was seen there at eleven o'clock. You figure he could have made thirty-five miles in under fifteen minutes including the city traffic?"

"I suppose not."

"You *suppose* not? You figure they wouldn't notice a helicopter coming down in the parking lot at that time of night."

"All right, he's clear, and I'm clear and Ned's clear. Those aren't the only people she knew, are they?" And maybe she didn't even know her killer—or *we* didn't."

"Which brings us back to that twenty-four hour day and the seven day week," Maltz said.

"How about that family that heard the quarreling? How good do you figure their story?"

"They gave me Regan." They gave me a plausible story about the quarreling. They haven't any damned connection with Miss Brenk excepting the geographical accident of having lived in the same apartment building." He paused then, to study me. "That girl across the hall, that Alice Hargreave, might be something else."

For some reason, I sensed that he was watching for my reaction to the name. "Hargreave?" I said. "That girl with the light hair?"

"Mmmm-hmmm. Know her?"

"I've seen her."

"She was about the only girl in the building who spent any time in Miss Brenk's apartment. And—she was quite a fan of yours, the people in the front apartment tell me."

"You're talking in riddles, Lieutenant," I said. "What do you mean—*fan*?"

"From the old days, when you were a

football player. If she was the jealous type, I might figure a lead, there. But it's a little far-fetched for a busy man. And now, if you don't mind, Vaughn, I'll get to work."

"One more thing, Lieutenant. You're sure in your own mind that Regan's clean?"

"No. I'm not sure about any of you. But what I feel and what I can get a conviction on are two different stories. Good-bye, Mr. Vaughn."

I left him.

Outside, I paused in indecision, and then decided to take a chance on Regan. He wouldn't tell me anything he hadn't told the police, but I wanted to see his reaction to some names.

I took a cab to the Morris Hotel. There was a regular clique of angle-shooters who lived there and made their deals in the hotel's coffee shop.

Regan was there without any of his buddies. He was in a booth near the front windows, all alone. He wasn't I realized such a bad looking gent with the mustache gone. He was beefy, ruggedly handsome.

His eyes were wary. I took the seat opposite him without saying a word.

III HIS eyes met mine, and he said: Lot of empty tables and booths, Cary."

"I wanted to talk to you."

"I'm all talked out. I've been talking to the police."

"I don't suppose you told them anything you didn't want them to know."

He shrugged. He said: "You're all worked up because of what happened. You're looking for somebody to take it out on. Well, Cary, I was at the Rainbow Cabin that night. You know where that is, don't you? That's right outside of Leedom City, and that's a long way from here."

"A couple of times," I said, "I thought

you were reading my mind. I guess you were, weren't you? Carol was telling you about my business, wasn't she?"

He met my gaze steadily. "No. I liked Carol all right, and I tried to pitch in that league, but we didn't talk about *you*."

"I know you did," I said. "And Duke Fallon tells me you tried to approach him on the Korotsky fight." Duke was my welter.

"He's lying," Regan said. "And if he did tell you that, why didn't you go to the commission with it?"

"The decision would be Duke's," I said. "I didn't have any reason for wanting to get you—not until *now*."

"You haven't any reason, now," he said. "You know I'm clean. You never had anything I wanted."

"Just my business and my girl," I told him.

"I thought a lot of Carol. But your business you can have. Just stay out of mine."

"And if I don't?"

"*Anything* might happen," he said evenly. "Don't flex your muscles around me, Vaughn. I'm not in the least frightened."

I contemplated pasting him, and he must have read the belligerence in my attitude.

He said: "The man sitting in that booth across the room is a city detective. He doesn't think I know it, but I do. Keep that in mind, and don't do anything foolish."

I looked across the room, and saw the man regarding us steadily. His eyes swiveled away as I continued to stare at him.

I slid out of the booth, and stood next to the table. "I'm not through with you," I told Regan. "The law might be, but I'm not."

As I left the restaurant and went out again to the street, something kept nag-

ging at my mind, something he'd said.

Carol and I hadn't been engaged for long. Perhaps knowing that I was serious, realizing that as my wife she'd share in my good or bad fortune, she'd decided to tell me about Regan, to warn me about him. That would make some sense out of her death.

But not enough. If she told me about Regan, he could just drop out of the picture. I didn't scare him enough for him to fear anything she might tell me about him. And it wasn't the law he feared; he'd tangled with that enough.

And he had been out at the Rainbow Cabin in Leedom City at eleven o'clock. Maltz would check that carefully.

If I knew what the quarrel had been about. . . .

There was a cab at the curb. I got in and gave him the address of Carol's apartment building.

I wanted to find out how much of the quarrel the people in the front apartment had heard. It was information I could probably get from Maltz, but Maltz didn't seem the cooperative type.

Neither did the woman who answered the door to my ring. I'd seen her once or twice while visiting Carol, but she looked at me suspiciously now through the partially opened door. There was a chain across the opening.

"We can't talk to anybody but the police, Mr. Vaughn," she said meekly. "My husband told me before he went to work not to let *anybody* in here."

"I just wanted to know about the quarrel you heard," I said. "I thought you might have heard something that would help me."

She shook her head. "The police have all that, Mr. Vaughn." The door closed.

I turned away, as someone in the hall said: "Could I talk to you a minute, Mr. Vaughn?"

Alice Hargreave stood in front of her open door. She was dressed to go out.

I walked up the hall and she indicated the open door. I went through, into a comfortable, colorful living room. It was a duplicate of Carol's apartment, but seemed warmer and more spacious.

"I was just going to work," she said, "and I heard what Mrs. Pearson was telling you." She nodded toward a chair, and I took it.

"What Mrs. Pearson meant was that she couldn't talk to anybody but the police—and the neighbors," Alice said. "From what she's told me, Carol said something about *telling Cary the whole setup* and about *watching out for my own future*. That's what made me think the man must have been this Bruce Regan."

"It was a man all right, then?"

There was surprise in her gaze. "I—suppose—isn't that what Lieutenant Maltz said?"

"He's very reticent about telling me his business," I answered. "A .22 doesn't seem to be a man's gun."

"From what I've read and heard," she said, "a .22 would be the logical weapon for an apartment building. It's quieter than the others, but—effective."

The whole set-up . . . The *whole* set-up . . . I looked up at Alice Hargreave. "I'll take you to work," I said. "I'll call a cab. And I want to apologize for last night. I was hurt pretty badly last night."

Her smile was timid. "Coming out of it?"

"Maybe. I guess—I'm the world's number one sucker."

"I'll call the cab," she said.

WE DIDN'T talk much on the trip to her office. She worked for an interior decorator over on Fifth; she'd worked for the same man in Chicago, and he'd wanted her along when he came to this town. He was doing very well here, and I sensed that she was, too.

"He's the top man in the town for my money," she said. "I've learned a lot from him."

"He's married?"

She frowned at me. "Happily married. With four lovely children. Any other questions?"

"Not today," I said. "You haven't accepted my apology, yet."

"Forget it," she said. "I've seen the Bears too often to expect they'd be gentlemen, even after they were retired."

"That's not fair," I said. "We're all gentlemen, and anyway the other team started it."

The cab stopped and she got out. "Stay in there, Tackle Vaughn," she said, and there was a lot of warmth in her smile.

I managed an answering smile.

(Continued on page 129)

KENT

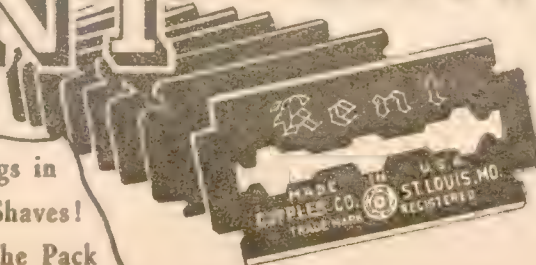
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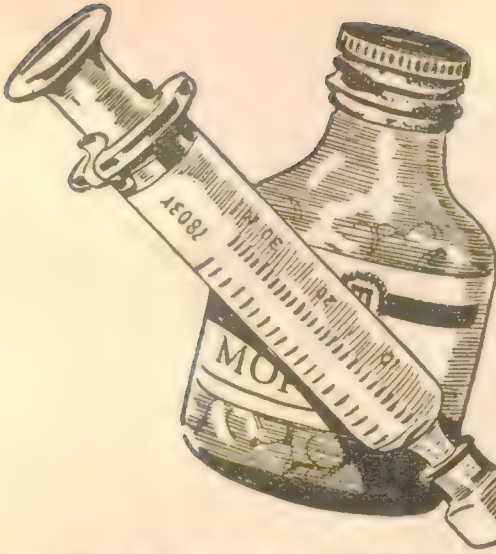
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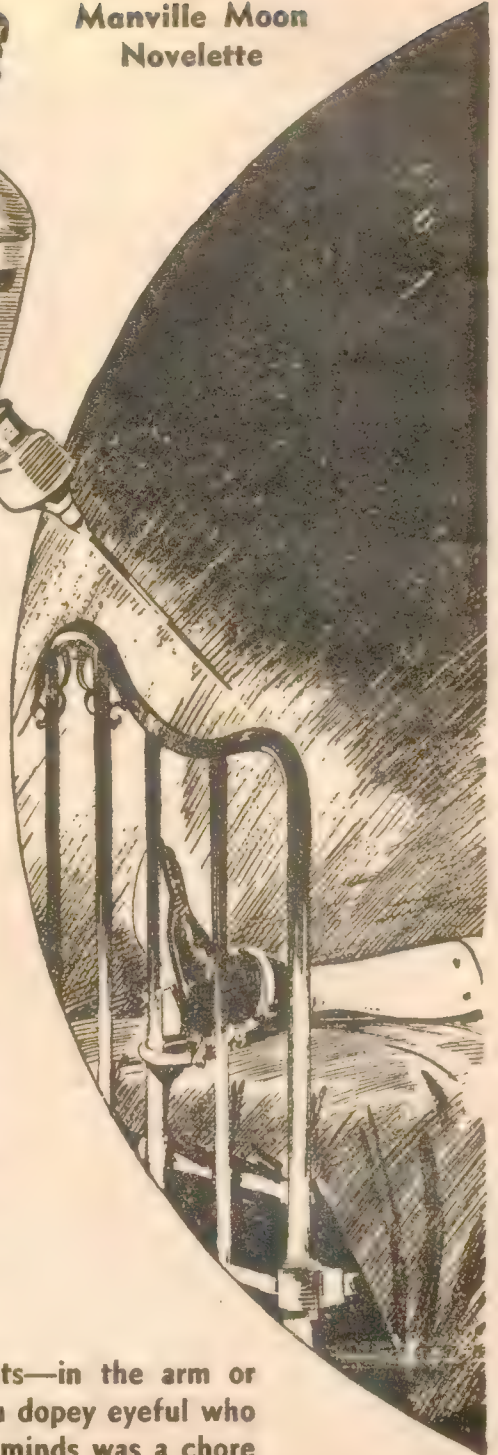


A SHOT IN THE ARM

HOW I became legally responsible for an adult incompetent was primarily a matter of economics. For if anyone at all, in the two months prior to Mrs. Quentin Rand's request for my services, had offered me three meals a day to walk his dog or shadow his wife, I'd have steered clear of Vivian Banner as though she had scabies.

But right at a time when food prices were climbing, the demand for private investigators—or at least the one named Manville Moon—dropped to zero. And having a mouth the size of two to feed,

Manville Moon was used to shots—in the arm or elsewhere. But baby-sitting with a dopey eyeful who drew visitors with death in their minds was a chore he wished he'd never taken on after the first kill.



By **RICHARD
DEMING**



Harry stood there staring stupidly at my manacled leg. "Boo!" I said.

I require lots of energy-building food, even when I'm doing nothing to expend the energy.

So, much as I disliked the job, for a month I had lived at the oversized home of Mrs. Quentin Rand as twenty-four-hour-a-day watchdog over her niece, Vivian Banner, and prospects were good that the month would stretch to seven.

Just to make everything cozy, a court had committed Vivian to my care, and she couldn't legally even take a bath unless I gave the O. K. Days she was allowed to move about as she wanted, within the limits of my field of view, but nights I kept her in the locked and barred bedroom between my own room and Mrs. Rand's.

One key had been made for each of Vivian's three doors, and there were no extras. The one to the hall door and to the connecting door between my room and Vivian's were in my possession, but Mrs. Rand had the key to the door between her own room and her niece's.

Vivian might not have cheered if I dropped dead, but she wouldn't have cried either. My job was to see that she kept from morphine until the doctor decided she was free of the habit, and Vivian liked morphine almost as much as she disliked me. Tonight she disliked me more intensely than usual because with Dr. Yoder's permission I had allowed her out of the house for the first time, and her attempt to run away and shoot herself full of dope had been singularly unsuccessful.

When I knocked on her door at dinner time, she inquired through the panel: "Who is it?"

"Moon," I said.

"Go away," she said crossly.

"Time for dinner."

"I don't want any."

I shrugged and went downstairs alone to the bleak prospect of dinner with Vivian's angular aunt. The dinner was

hot, but the atmosphere was clammy. Mrs. Rand let me build no illusions concerning my social status. I was an employee, not a guest, and she obviously would have preferred that I eat in the kitchen. Nor was it politeness which prevented her from suggesting it, but only the certain knowledge that I would tell her to douse her head in the kitchen sink. With her continual peering at me through the distorting lenses of ribboned nose glasses, as though checking my use of the proper fork, Mrs. Rand was not an inspiring mealtime companion. Immediately after the last silent course, I grunted an apology, went up to my room and rapped on the connecting door.

"I don't want to talk to you," Vivian called loudly.

Mildly irked, I moved out into the hall and tried her front door. I found it locked and continued on to Mrs. Rand's room. I knew Mrs. Rand was still downstairs because I had just left her there, but I knocked in order to prove I was a gentleman, pushed open the door and entered. The connecting door to Vivian's room was locked as tightly as the others.

As I started back out into the hall, I noticed a key lying on Mrs. Rand's dresser. Picking it up, I saw it was the key to Vivian's door.

Back downstairs, I gave the key to Mrs. Rand and said: "You left this on your dresser again. That makes twice."

All that got me was a curdling look through her thick glasses, but she took the key and wrapped it in her handkerchief.

Returning to my own room, I stared at the walls and thought over my next move in the campaign to keep Vivian from dope. Before accepting the job I had realized that once Vivian's treatment reached the stage where she was allowed out of the house, it would be impossible to keep the girl in sight constantly for six months. She probably

would spend most of her time trying to shake me and would only have to be lucky once. I had reasoned that my only chance of success was to let her run, tail her to her source of drug, and eliminate the source.

THAT afternoon, her first outside the house since the treatment started, Vivian obligingly but unknowingly had led me to private detective Joseph Alamado, who maintained his office in a ramshackle building on Second Street. Now, my problem was how to pin the goods on Joe and shove him behind bars, while I was handicapped by not being able to leave Vivian. I still hadn't solved the problem when I fell asleep.

When I awoke at eight, I shaved and dressed, then tapped on my incompetent charge's door. When there was no answer, I tapped again, waited a minute, then unlocked the door and walked in.

I thought she was sleeping until I caught the faint purplish cast of her features and saw that her eyes were wide open. For a moment I stood looking down at her, feeling a dull rage mount within me and mix with self-recrimination. Drawing back the covers, I lifted one thin arm and found the fresh needle puncture just above the wrist. Vivian had had her last shot in the arm, and it hadn't been morphine. It hadn't been self-administered either, because the syringe was missing.

I tried to tell myself there had been no intimation of danger to Vivian's life, and even if there had been, keeping her in a locked and barred room was ample protection, but I couldn't sell myself the alibi. For this was the second murder, and after the first, I should have been on guard. Half-heartedly I told myself Vivian's mother had been murdered before I took this job, that her killing had apparently been done by a

motiveless maniac, that I hadn't been retained either to solve Mrs. Banner's murder or prevent Vivian's, but any way I looked at it, the situation boiled down to one point: I had let a client get murdered right under my nose. And the fact that I thought I could guess the murderer, or at least the instigator, was little consolation to either Vivian or me.

The door to Mrs. Rand's room stood slightly ajar. I pushed it open, saw the key was in the lock and walked over to the bed, where Vivian's aunt still lay sleeping. I stood over her long enough to decide from the even rise and fall of her covers that she was all right, then went to the open window. A light gardener's ladder leaned against the side of the house immediately beneath the window.

Returning to the bed, I shook Mrs. Rand awake. She looked up without surprise, and I was startled by my first glimpse of her eyes unprotected by their heavy eyeglasses. Weak and watery and red-ringed, they gave her an appearance of meek frustration, entirely counter to their imperious haughty glint when magnified.

Apparently conscious of my surprise, she shielded her eyes from the light with back of one hand and said: "Hand me my glasses from the dresser, if you please."

I found the ribboned, thick-lensed spectacles and gave them to her. When she had them adjusted to her nose, she sat up, pulled the sheet protectively across her shoulders and asked: "What's the matter?"

"You left the key on your dresser again," I said. "Somebody borrowed it."

"Has Vivian run away?"

"She's dead," I said bluntly.

Behind their thick lenses, her eyes widened.

"How . . . What happened?"

"Murder. You'd better get up and phone the police. I have to see a man."

She stared at me as though she had never seen me before. "Where—where are you going?"

"To pick up a guy. Tell the cops to put out a call for Joseph Alamado, a private dick with an office on Second Street. I'm going after him, but he may have holed up. If I find him, I'll bring him back here and turn him over to the cops. Got the name?"

"Alamado. Joseph Alamado." Her eyes were wide and frightened. "Did he kill Vivian?"

"Probably. If he didn't, he knows who did. He's the peddler who supplied Vivian's drugs, and yesterday she threatened to turn him over to the police." I added thoughtfully: "It was probably a hired job. Don't believe Joe has the guts for murder himself. If I thought he had any guts, I'd have squashed him yesterday and Vivian would still be alive." I pondered this idea for a moment, then said impatiently: "But I didn't squash him, and post mortem strategy can't bring Vivian back to life. I want to use Harry and the Packard."

"All right," she said. "I'll phone Harry to bring it around front." She reached for her bedside phone.

I said: "I have to get some things from my room. Tell Harry to honk when he's ready."

She had the phone to her ear and was pressing the inter-house switch when I pulled her door closed behind me.

Back in my room, I slipped off my suit coat, strapped on my shoulder holster and put the coat back on. From my bag I took a pair of handcuffs and stuffed them in my hip pocket. Then I went down to the kitchen, found Nellie, the housekeeper, pouring herself a cup of coffee and had a cup myself while waiting for Harry to honk.

CHAPTER TWO

Discreet and Incorruptible

THE first time I saw Vivian Banner, six weeks before her death, I was impressed by her beauty. And since few beautiful women call at my apartment, which for reasons of economy doubles as an office, I racked my brain for a method of keeping her for cocktails and politely sending her aunt home as soon as the aunt got around to stating her business.

In a tone of quiet innocence, which suited her soft skin, delicate features and large-irised eyes, Vivian said: "What aunt is trying to say, without shocking you, is that I'm a drug addict."

I quickly adjusted my thinking and examined the girl again. Her hair was as smooth and golden as the first time I looked, her figure as soft and her complexion as clear. But now I noticed pinched lines at the edge of her nostrils and a faint redness of the eyelids. The large irises I had admired took on a different significance, too. They were large because the pupils had contracted to points.

I said inanely: "I'm out of dope, but I can offer you a cocktail."

Too often my humor convulses no one but myself. Neither woman died laughing.

Mrs. Quentin Rand said coldly: "My lawyer recommended you, Mr. Moon. Alexander Carson."

"Alex?" I said, surprised. Alex Carson once remarked that his highest social ambition was to be seen at my funeral.

"He said you were both discreet and incorruptible."

"Alex said that?" I asked, even more surprised.

Vivian Banner's soft voice put in: "He also decried you as insulting, flippant and uncouth."

I relaxed. "That sounds more like Alex." I had once insultingly refused his bribe to commit perjury, flippantly gathered up the seat of his pants and uncouthly tossed him downstairs.

Mrs. Rand said: "As my niece so abruptly put it, she has been unfortunate enough to contract the morphine habit." Through ribboned glasses with thick, distorting lenses, she frowned at Vivian exactly like my sixth grade teacher used to frown when I failed to do my homework.

Mrs. Quentin Rand was tall and spare, and faintly disapproving of social inferiors like myself. From hearsay and the society news section, I knew a little about her. Her husband was one of the broker suicides of 1929, but something must have been salvaged from the crash, because Mrs. Rand maintained an expensive home complete with servants, and more than once her chauffeur-driven Packard had passed street cars on which I happened to be riding.

"We want Vivian cured of the habit," Mrs. Rand said.

"Who's 'we'?"

She raised her eyebrows. "The whole family. Myself, Vivian's parents—she's my brother's step-daughter—and of course, Vivian herself wants to be cured."

I said: "You must have gotten the wrong address. I'm not a doctor. I'm a private detective. Aren't there sanitariums for that kind of treatment?"

"I've flunked out of the three best in the country," Vivian said. "They rate me incurable." She flashed a mocking smile but deep in her eyes was a quivering fright. She fished a cigarette from her purse and her hand shook when she put it into her mouth.

Mrs. Rand said: "Dr. James Yoder is now treating Vivian. Her parents have placed her completely in my charge until the cure is effected, and I've had a room prepared at my home. I have also

engaged three private nurses. Under the treatment Dr. Yoder has outlined, Vivian must stay in bed for two weeks, be confined to home for another two, and then constantly watched for six months, making the whole treatment run for seven months."

I asked: "Where do I come in?"

"You're to stay with or near Vivian from the time treatment starts until she's cured."

I blinked. "For seven months?"

Mrs. Rand nodded.

"What am I supposed to do?"

Mrs. Rand drew her lips into a prim line. "I know nothing about drug habits, but Dr. Yoder says an addict will use every subterfuge to get drugs while a treatment is being attempted. Right now Vivian wants nothing so much as to be free of the habit. But once the cure starts, she'll try bribery, she'll attempt to sneak out at night, she'll try literally anything she can think of to get more morphine. It will be your job to make sure she doesn't get it. That's where previous treatments have failed, and Dr. Yoder believes if we can actually keep her from drugs for six months after the initial treatment, the cure will be permanent."

I thought over the proposition before I said anything. Then I said: "Seven months of my time will run into money."

Mrs. Rand waved that aside. "Expense is not a consideration."

"My fee is twenty-five dollars a day, plus expenses."

Mrs. Rand's straight back straightened even more. "Twenty-five dollars! The nurses I engaged charge only nine!"

I shrugged. "Then hire another nurse."

Vivian said: "After all, Aunt Grace, Dad will be paying for it."

Mrs. Rand gave in, though not graciously. "I suppose we have no choice. But twenty-five dollars! Everywhere you turn, you meet inflation." She looked

me over distastefully. "When will you be available?"

I shrugged again. "Maybe tomorrow. Maybe never. Depends on my talk with Dr. Yoder."

"Dr. Yoder? What has he to do with it? We've agreed to your exorbitant fee, and you're engaged."

"Listen, lady," I said, "I'm not for sale like a pound of sausage, and I won't starve next week if I turn you down." I neglected to mention I would starve the week after. "I'll tell you tomorrow if I want the job."

She didn't like it, but there was nothing she could do. She fumed a bit, and talked down to me as though I were one of the hired help, but in the end she left Dr. Yoder's address and her own telephone number, and departed with her niece.

I CAME out of the war with only a leg and a half instead of the usual quota of two legs. The cork, aluminum and leather substitute, which the Veterans' Administration furnished to replace the missing portion, is as useful and comfortable as science has yet been able to devise, but it is neither as useful nor comfortable as the original right leg.

I started a blister on the stump by walking the six blocks to Dr. Yoder's office, and arrived in a sour mood. Having a false leg has restricted my physical activity very little except when I rub a blister, and then it sometimes leaves me a cripple for as long as two weeks.

Dr. James Yoder was a general practitioner of the type commonly called a "society doctor", which meant his oversized fees were not necessarily a criterion of his training and ability. He was in his sixties—stocky, bland and courteous—with an affability which would have made him a pleasant barroom companion, but which failed to inspire my confidence in his professional ability.

"Normally wouldn't discuss a patient's condition with a layman," the doctor said. "But since Mrs. Rand informs me you're to act as some kind of guardian or watchdog over Miss Banner during her treatment, suppose that makes you sort of a colleague."

He showed his teeth in a confidential smile. "Actually, I don't hold much hope for a cure. Nearly as I can determine, Miss Banner's been a morphine habitué since she was twenty, and she's twenty-four now. Claims she takes but one injection a day, but I suspect she uses at least three, and possibly four or five." He frowned slightly and pulled at his lower lip. "Trouble with morphine is it acts on that part of the brain controlling moral tendencies. Habitues are always such infernal liars, even when there's no point in it. Especially dreamers."

"What's a dreamer?" I asked.

"An addict who takes enough drug to throw himself into a dream state. Morphine affects different people differently, you see. Some get all pepped up and don't act any different from you or me, except they're more full of energy. Others pass into a drowsy state and imagine all sorts of things. Have dreams something like opium dreams. Morphine's an alkaloid of opium, you see. All morphine habitues are liars, but dreamers are the worst, and Miss Banner sometimes drugs herself into a coma lasting hours. Awfully hard to treat a patient who won't tell the truth, you know."

He looked at me for sympathy and I nodded my head. Encouraged, he went on.

"Actually, I think the place for the girl is a locked ward in a sanitarium. Told the family so, but Mrs. Rand has this room fixed up, and insists on home treatment. Says they've tried sanitariums." He snorted. "The girl's been in three as a voluntary patient. Damn-fool family refused to commit her, and all she

had to do was walk out." He shrugged. "But it's their money, and if I don't treat her, someone else will."

He glanced at me slyly, as one confederate to another in on a soft touch. I kept my face expressionless.

"Then the treatment's a phoney?"

"Oh, no," he protested quickly. "If Miss Banner were actually kept from morphine for several months, she'd probably be cured. But how you going to keep it away from her?" He glowered at me from beneath down-drawn brows. "Judas, man, you don't know what a morphine addict without drugs is like. Twenty-four hours a day she'll have only one thing on her mind . . . Morphine. She'll do anything for it. And I mean literally anything. She'll lie, bribe, steal. She may even try to kill you. If you block all that, she'll try ducking out of your sight. And you can't possibly keep her in sight for six months."

I said: "Why not?"

He looked exasperated. "You going to accompany her to the shower bath? You going to sleep in the same room?" One fist pounded softly on his desk. "Watch the door and she'll be out the window. Watch the window, and she'll be out the door."

I stood up. "You take care of your end, Doc, and I'll take care of mine. She won't get any dope."

He said skeptically: "Think not?" Then he shrugged. "All we can do is try. After all, if I don't treat her, they'll just go to another doctor, and if you don't take the case, they'll just hire another private detective. Might as well be us getting the fees."

"Sure," I said. "But just for the record, I'm intending to earn mine."

AS A matter of course, the Rand home had been built on Lindell Boulevard, for of all streets in the city, only Lindell was as socially dis-

tinguished as the name "Rand". A pleasant, but oversized structure of rose granite, it somewhat resembled a public library. Wide lawns kept the neighboring houses on either side a sedate two hundred feet away, which, in a city, is isolation.

A dour-faced housekeeper pushing seventy answered my ring and examined me with eyes bitter at the world.

I said: "What's the matter? Boy friend jilt you?"

She said: "What you want?"

"Mrs. Rand. And a kind smile."

She muttered: "At that face, who could smile?" and stepped aside. "You must be that detective. She said you was ugly, but she missed it by half."

I'm not sensitive about my face. The one I was born with wasn't too bad, but in my early youth before I learned to duck, a set of brass knuckles gave me a drooping eyelid and a bent nose. Still, I don't think I'm repellent. A maudlin woman once told me I resembled a battered Saint Bernard.

I followed the old woman into a drawing room, where a tea party seemed to be in progress. On the surface it was an innocuous tea party. Only weeks later, when little bits of evidence began to fall into place, did I understand I had viewed the prologue to the first murder, and even contributed to its necessity without realizing it.

Mrs. Rand, a saucer expertly held in her left hand, glanced up as we stopped in the doorway, and thick-lensed glasses, behind which her eyes were magnified out of proportion, glinted as she dismissed the housekeeper with a cold nod of annoyance.

On a sofa next to Mrs. Rand's chair sat a plump woman and a tall, gaunt man who was a male version of Mrs. Rand. Relaxed in an easy chair which seemed to have been specially built for him, with the crook of a heavy cane ly-

ing in his lap, was a giant fat man whose quantities of excess flesh could only be described as oozing. His head was a melon, smooth and white and benevolent, and as hairless as the sole of my foot. He was gesturing with a sugared cookie, while he discoursed on the subject of ants. I learned that red ants had a much more efficiently organized civilization than humans before Mrs. Rand cut him off by introducing me around.

"These are Vivian's mother and stepfather, Mr. Moon," she said, indicating the couple on the sofa. "My brother, Claude Banner, and my sister-in-law, Martha." To the man she said: "Claude, this is Mr. Manville Moon, the private detective I told you about."

I shook hands with Claude Banner and murmured something polite to his wife.

"And this is Mr. Sheridan," Mrs. Rand said, indicating the obese giant. "Norman Sheridan, the entomologist, you know."

Her tone suggested that of course I had heard of Norman Sheridan.

"Oh, yes," I said, never having heard of him, and having only a vague notion that entomology somehow concerned bugs.

His hand gobbled up mine as though I had thrust it into a bucket of dough. I got mine back as quickly as I could.

"Will you have some tea?" Mrs. Rand asked.

I said: "No, thanks."

"Tea is a ritual in this house," she said with a curious air of defensiveness, as though she thought I might not approve. "I think it a shame most Americans have let the custom lapse."

"Delightful custom," rumbled Norman Sheridan, heaving his bulk forward to reach another sugared cookie.

I found myself a chair and prepared to wait patiently for Sheridan to leave so that Vivian's parents, Mrs. Rand and I

could discuss our highly private business. But apparently Mrs. Rand kept no secrets from her fat friend.

"Dr. Yoder phoned that you were coming," she said. "When can you start?"

I glanced at Sheridan and hiked my eyebrows.

"You may speak freely before Mr. Sheridan. Norman is one of my oldest friends, and he knows all about Vivian. He spends nearly as much time here as I do."

"A case of unrequited love," Norman explained. "The drone hovering about the queen bee." His gelatinous body shook at his own jest.

I said: "I can start as soon as we agree on terms."

Mrs. Rand drew in her chin and examined me suspiciously. "We have agreed on terms."

"I don't mean financial. I mean concerning my responsibility and authority. Particularly my authority."

"What do you mean by that?"

I said: "Dr. Yoder tells me your niece is pretty far gone. Possibly incurable. He seems to think keeping her from dope for six months after she's allowed out of the house will be a difficult job. If I'm to keep her from it, I want absolute authority over her actions. I want her declared legally incompetent and committed to my care for a period of seven months."

Claude Banner said: "That's ridiculous. Vivian's not incompetent."

"Of course not. You're just hiring a doctor, three nurses and a private detective because she gets lonesome."

He turned a faint red. "My stepdaughter is a capable and intelligent young woman, Mr. Moon. I regard her condition as a disease, just as though she had diabetes or heart trouble, and I'll thank you not to refer to her as though she were some kind of moron."

"Stop kidding yourself," I said. "Vivian's a dope addict and has no more right to exercise her own judgment than a two year old. Maybe I didn't make myself clear, so I'll put it in the form of an ultimatum. We'll do things exactly the way I want them done, or you can hire another watchdog."

Banner said: "In that case, we won't need you."

"I'll decide that."

IT WAS the first time Vivian's mother had spoken, and although her voice was quiet, an underlying chord of decisiveness ran through it.

All eyes swiveled toward her. I was surprised at the immediate attention she drew, for she had not impressed me as an imposing personality. Mrs. Banner swept her gaze around the circle in a gesture of what almost seemed defiance, then turned to me.

"Do I understand you want to be appointed Vivian's guardian, Mr. Moon?"

"Her committee," I said. "Guardianship applies only to minors, and they call you a committee instead of a guardian when your charge is an adult incompetent. Amounts to the same thing."

"Why do you think this necessary?"

I explained why bluntly. "First, I don't want well-meaning interference from you people. Second, I make it a point to finish what I start. Once I take the case, I've no intention of letting anyone fire me. And you can't fire me if a court commits Vivian to my care."

Mrs. Rand said: "That would involve administration of her funds."

"So what? You've checked me so thoroughly, you probably know which cheek I shave first in the morning. Think I'd steal your niece's money?"

Mrs. Banner said: "I think we'd better do as Mr. Moon wishes."

Mrs. Rand's thick glasses glinted as she peered estimatingly at her sister-in-

law. Then, with an expression which seemed to ask, "What else can we do?" she said to her brother: "Alex Carson told me I'd find Mr. Moon stubborn, blunt and—ah—tyrannical. But he also recommended him as scrupulously honest and the only person he knew who might accomplish what Dr. Yoder says is necessary. It rather looks like we won't get along with Mr. Moon, but we can't get along without him either."

"Alex Carson is your lawyer, isn't he?" Mrs. Banner asked.

"Yes."

"Have him make the necessary arrangements then." Her tone made it almost an order, and again I was surprised, because she didn't look like an imperious person. She turned to me. "I'm sure that between you and Dr. Yoder Vivian will be in excellent hands. You do think this treatment will work, don't you?"

I shrugged. "Possibly. Dr. Yoder told me he advised you people to commit her to a sanitarium and leave her there till she's well, but you prefer home treatment. If Vivian were my daughter, I'd follow the doctor's advice. Of course you might not be able to keep it quiet, but I assume your primary objective is to get Vivian well."

Mrs. Banner glanced sharply at her husband. "You didn't tell me this, Claude."

Banner raised an appeasing hand. "Now, dear, don't get upset. It seems to me Grace has things well organized, and I see no reason to have Vivian committed if we can accomplish the same end without danger of publicity. If this doesn't work, we'll talk about another sanitarium."

His wife continued to look at him coldly without saying anything, until his face turned a faint red. Fumbling out a gold pocket watch, he dropped his eyes to it, looked surprised and rose.

"My plane leaves in an hour and I have to stop at home for my bag. Guess I'll have to borrow your car, Grace."

"Certainly, Claude," Mrs. Rand said. She rose from her chair and pulled a cord hanging against the wall.

Claude Banner said something about getting their coats, and disappeared into the hall. As he passed through the door, the ancient housekeeper entered.

Mrs. Rand said: "Send Harry in, will you, Nellie?"

Nellie nodded grumpily, turned around and left.

Banner returned wearing a light topcoat and carrying a short fur jacket, which he held while his wife slipped into it.

"Pleasant to have met you, Mr. Moon," Mrs. Banner said, and held out her hand.

I returned the compliment, wondering again at her previous flash of decisiveness. She looked like the average housewife, plump and goodnatured and inclined to consider her husband the head of the house.

A quiet voice from the doorway said: "You wanted me, Madam?"

I glanced that way and there in a neat chauffeur's uniform stood Harry Gusset. My last sight of Harry was when he stood before a judge receiving a two-year sentence for extortion, largely as a result of my testimony. He had been standing on crutches, which was also my fault, since he had broken a leg trying to prevent me from arresting him.

He saw me the same moment I saw him, and he literally seemed to wilt.

Mrs. Rand said: "What's the matter, Harry?"

I don't believe in hounding ex-convicts who try to go straight. Harry's uniform indicated he was trying to make an honest living, and I had no intention of spoiling his chance. Keeping my face expressionless, I gave him a wink.

Straightening his back, he looked sickly at Mrs. Rand and said: "Nothing's the matter, Madam."

She peered at him through her glasses. "You look frightened to death."

I said: "He bumped his elbow on the door coming in."

For a moment Harry stared at me blankly. Then he got it. "Yes. The crazy bone. I'll be all right in a minute."

"Oh," said Mrs. Rand, losing interest. "Is the car out front?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Drive Mr. and Mrs. Banner home and then take Mr. Banner to the airport."

Claude Banner shook my hand and said: "Glad I met you, Moon. Won't see you for about a week because I'm flying south on business tonight. In the meantime Grace can go ahead with incompetency proceedings and I'll sign any necessary papers when I get back."

Norman Sheridan, who had sat beamingly silent for a long time, gripped his cane handle with both fists and heaved his huge body from its chair. "I'd better run along too, Grace. May I hitch a ride, Claude?"

Banner indicated that he could, and Sheridan, his cane ornamentally hooked over a fat forearm, now that it had served what seemed to be its sole function—helping him erect—lumbered out.

In the doorway, Mrs. Banner smiled back at me over her shoulder.

I never saw her again.

CHAPTER THREE

No Body at All

"WHERE'S Vivian?" I asked Mrs. Rand. "In her room?"

She shook her head. "Beauty appointment."

"Then I'd like to look at this room you've prepared."

Mrs. Rand led me upstairs and down a hall to the right wing of the house. The room was an ordinary bedroom with private bath, and with doors connecting it to other bedrooms on either side. The only "preparations" consisted of three-quarter inch steel bars at the two bedroom windows and the across bath windows.

"Dr. Yoder says the initial treatment may leave Vivian temporarily irrational," Mrs. Rand said, indicating the bars. "Of course, it's unlikely she'll become so irrational as to attempt suicide, but we're taking no chances.

"That's my bedroom," she said, pointing to the right connecting door. "Yours is the other. I'm sorry you won't have a private bath, but there's a general bath down the hall."

"I'll live," I said.

I examined the locks of the hall door and of the connecting doors into Mrs. Rand's and my bedrooms.

"I want special locks put on all these," I said. "Locks making it impossible to open the door from either side without a key. And have only one key made for each lock."

She raised her eyebrows. "Do you think that really necessary?"

"Yes."

She frowned and said in a prim voice: "Very well. Anything else?"

"Not at the moment. You can start incompetency proceedings immediately. Tell Alex he can reach me at my flat."

Alex phoned me the following afternoon.

"Take about two weeks to put everything through," he said. "But I don't contemplate any hitches. Explained the whole situation to Judge Crawford this morning, and he'll go along if we get proper medical statements and so forth. Yoder will take care of the medical end, and it makes things less complicated that Vivian herself is making no fight."

"She isn't?"

"Think the idea intrigues her. Being ordered around by a Saint Bernard. That's what she calls you."

"I've been called one before," I said.

"Bribed any witnesses lately?"

"Aw, don't you ever forget?"

"No," I said.

The following week I spent mainly on my back, listening to my bank account dwindle and allowing my stump blister to heal. It was past the danger of re-irritation when I had a caller.

Lieutenant Hannegan, neat and dapper in his perennial blue serge suit, and looking exactly like a cop in plain clothes, brought an invitation from Inspector Warren Day.

"For what, he didn't say," Hannegan told me. "All I know is he wants you."

Since it was only eleven o'clock in the morning, he had caught me in bed. He waited passively while I shaved and dressed, then drove me over to headquarters.

Several people sat around in the chief of homicide's office. Aside from Warren Day were Mrs. Rand, Vivian, Claude Banner, Norman Sheridan and Harry Gusset. Banner seemed worried, Vivian seemed upset, but the rest looked only puzzled.

Inspector Warren Day ducked his skinny bald head to peer at me over his glasses and said with heavy irony: "Sorry to disturb your rest, Manny. I know it's tiring to lean against a bar every night."

"Always glad to come down and solve any cases you can't handle," I said courteously.

Fishing through his littered ash tray, Day found a cigar butt which satisfied him, stuck it in his mouth without lighting it and leaned back in his chair to view the assemblage.

"I called you people together because you were the last to see Mrs. Banner."

The others waited quietly for him to proceed, but I broke in: "Wait a minute. What's happened to Mrs. Banner?"

Day swiveled his head to peer at me coldly. "She's missing. Hasn't been seen since Mrs. Rand's car dropped her at her home a week ago."

I asked Mrs. Rand: "The day I was at your house?"

She nodded and Claude Banner said: "Harry ran us home and I stopped in just long enough to pick up my bag. Norman was with us, if you remember, and the last any of us saw of her, she was waving from the porch. Harry dropped Norman at his house, and then ran me to the airport. When I got back last night, the house was locked, the fire out and Martha had simply disappeared. I inquired everywhere I could think of and learned no one had seen her since the day I left, so I reported it to the police."

"She's only missing?" I asked Day.

He moved his skinny head up and down, watching me suspiciously.

"When'd you take over the missing persons bureau?"

"Now listen here, Moon," the inspector started to say.

"She's dead," I said flatly.

Everyone but Claude Banner looked at me, startled. Banner wet his lips and looked at Warren Day. He didn't seem particularly upset. Vivian's mouth drew into a thin line.

"You speak when you're spoken to!" Day exploded. "I'm directing this investigation!"

"Sure. And you're chief of homicide. I don't know what you're pulling, but you wouldn't be interested unless you had a body."

Vivian said: "It's true. My mother's dead." She began to sob quietly.

"Hannegan!" Day shouted at his right hand man, nearly blasting him over, since he stood only a foot from the inspector's desk. "Clear everybody out

but Moon! Keep 'em outside till I call for 'em."

Hannegan shooed the startled group from the office, and Warren Day glared at me furiously. "Why can't you keep your big mouth shut?"

Relaxing in a chair next to his desk, I reached into his cigar humidor, but jerked back empty fingers when he snapped down the lid.

"If you'd take me in on your plans, I wouldn't blow them up," I said reasonably. "How was I supposed to know you had secrets?"

"I didn't want that bunch to know what's going on till I had their stories," Day growled. Dropping his dead cigar in the ash tray, he fished out another butt. "What were you doing at Mrs. Rand's house?"

"Just a social call."

He glared at me over his glasses. "Don't want to cooperate, eh?"

"Sure I do. Soon as you tell me what's going on."

Day chewed his cigar while he examined me with distaste. "All right, Manny," he said finally. "I know if I gave you the rubber hose, I'd get nothing, so I'll save time for both of us. I'll bring you up to date, if you'll unload what you know to me."

"Fine," I said, and managed to snake out one of his cigars without losing a finger.

"The body showed up at Bakersville, ten miles down the river, about an hour before Banner reported his wife missing. She had a bullet in her and had been dead about a week. We called Banner in late last night to identify the body, and told him to keep his mouth shut until we released the news ourselves. He's the only one who knew she was dead."

"Why the secrecy?"

"Wanted to see their reactions. Got to start somewhere, and there's not a sign of a clue."

"How about the bullet?"

"Hit a bone. .45 caliber, but the lab can't tell us whether it came from a gun or a pea-shooter."

I asked: "Think Banner himself did it?"

Day snorted. "Mrs. Rand's chauffeur and that fat guy, Sheridan, both saw Mrs. Banner wave goodbye. After that Banner wasn't out of the chauffeur's sight till he boarded a plane for Mexico City."

"Maybe he flew back again."

Day shook his head. "We had the airlines check passenger lists for that. Just to make sure, we're also making a check-up by Mexico City police, but I think Banner's clear. He makes regular trips to Mexico City every month. Operates an importing business, and does all the buying himself. Says he always stays at the same hotel, so it should be easy enough for the Mexico City police to verify his alibi."

He didn't seem inclined to pass on anything else, so I asked: "That the whole story?"

"Yeah. Now what were you doing at Mrs. Rand's place?"

"Just a social call," I said, snaking another cigar from the ash tray.

IN SPITE of her aunt's and stepfather's arguments that Vivian's treatment be postponed until she got over the shock of her mother's death, Vivian insisted on going ahead with original arrangements. Her insistence was fanatical rather than merely determined, for she was obviously terrified at the agony she thought she would go through. As the day of the court session drew near, she developed an air of numb fascination resembling that of an early Christian preparing to throw herself in the flames in pursuit of an ideal. I saw her only twice, and both times she was drugged to the eyebrows.

The murder remained a mystery, at least to me. What progress the homicide department was making, I didn't know, since Warren Day stopped speaking to me after our last session together. And since I was engaged by Mrs. Rand only to keep Vivian away from morphine, and not to solve incidental murders, I made no attempt to check up.

Now that it's all over, and I can look back at the complete picture in all its details, I can see I might have saved Vivian's life if I had done something about her mother's murder. Even if I had merely thought about it seriously, I might have drawn some significance from the casual happenings during the tea party where I met Vivian's mother. Not enough to solve the case, probably, but perhaps enough to stir an awareness of danger to Vivian and place me on guard.

It bothers me still when I think about it, but actually I had no reason to concern myself. In the first place no one asked me to do anything about Mrs. Banner, and I get in enough trouble sticking my nose where I'm hired to stick it, without prying into murders for free. In the second place no one in the family, including Vivian, who was so completely obsessed by her approaching ordeal that she hadn't even time for grief, so much as mentioned the matter. And just because you're a private investigator, you don't tactlessly choose a murdered relative as a conversational subject when you talk to people, unless somebody pays you to pry.

When I thought about it at all, it was to idly wonder if it had been a lunatic murder, one of those tough ones where a nut with no motive except desire to kill picks a victim he never saw before. Those happen, you know, and happen frequently. And the killer is rarely caught until he butchers two or three.

In any event, I left the investigation of Mrs. Banner's murder to the homicide

squad and continued to spend most of my time on my back waiting for Judge Crawford to get around to convening court in order to consider the competency of the murdered woman's daughter. The days dragged by one by one and my bank account shrunk to zero, and I started a charge account at my favorite restaurant.

But even Judgment Day will arrive if you wait long enough, and nine days after my conversation with Inspector Day, Judge Crawford held a closed session in his chambers. When Alex Carson, Mrs. Rand, Vivian and I left the courtroom together, I bore a document naming me the temporary committee of Miss Vivian Banner, aged 24, declared legally incompetent by court order. The document emphasized in several places that my appointment was temporary, and named a date seven months away at which time the court would again consider evidence of my charge's competence and take such additional action it deemed appropriate.

Mrs. Rand also carried a document, one carefully prepared by Alex Carson and to which my witnessed signature was affixed. In it I declared that I had been employed by the family for the sole purpose of preventing Vivian Banner from obtaining or taking drugs during the next seven months, that by general family agreement I had been chosen as the proper temporary committee for that purpose only, that I had no interest nor claim in Miss Banner's estate and, in the event of her death, I waived all rights of inheritance and/or administration of her estate.

Alex, in spite of his recommendation that I was "scrupulously honest," was taking no chances.

All four of us squeezed into the rear seat of Mrs. Rand's Packard. I offered to sit with Harry, but Mrs. Rand chilled the suggestion as though it were im-

proper. Alex Carson and I drew small folding seats and rode backward, facing the two women.

During the ride to Mrs. Rand's home Alex tried to make light conversation. He looked every inch the distinguished barrister as he sat erect but easily on the uncomfortable drop-down seat, his gaunt, intelligent features carefully holding a poised smile. Narrow, snow-white sideburns which merged into dark, gray-flecked hair, added to the effect of mature integrity. "What an honest looking guy," I thought, feeling to see if I still had my wallet.

Mrs. Rand answered Carson's conversational attempts with monosyllables, and Vivian and I made no attempt to answer at all.

Once Vivian said to me: "How does it feel to be a father, Daddy?"

I scowled at her, expecting to meet a mocking expression. Her lips smiled, but in her eyes was an almost incredible fright. I let my scowl fade into an encouraging grin.

Dr. Yoder was waiting for us in the drawing room when we arrived at the Rand home. With him was a middle-aged nurse in a starched uniform. Dr. Yoder rose from his chair.

"Good afternoon," he said affably in all-inclusive greeting. He introduced the nurse as Miss Livingston, then said to Vivian: "Ready to become a patient?"

"Today? Are we going to start today?"

She looked from one to another of us, and I could see a pulse begin to beat in her throat. Nobody said anything.

"I mean, it's been such a trying day already..." Her voice trailed off and she gave a nervous laugh. "Whatever you think best, Doctor. It's just that I didn't expect to start today."

Mrs. Rand said: "I asked Doctor Yoder to be here when we returned from court. There's no point in delay."

The doctor made his voice patroniz-

ingly hearty. "Sooner you get to bed, young lady, sooner we'll have you up. Go on upstairs and Miss Livingston will be up in a minute."

VIVIAN summoned a ghastly smile and left the room without a word. Dr. Yoder immediately dropped his jolly manner and turned professional.

"Nurse has her orders," he said to Mrs. Rand. "Be relieved by a night nurse at eleven. You understand, of course, the nurse is in complete charge of patient when I'm not here. Please give her any help she needs." He glanced at me. "Afraid not much for you to do next two weeks, Moon."

I asked: "What's this treatment involve?"

He drew down his brows in fair imitation of Lionel Barrymore in a Dr. Gillespie role. "We gradually withdraw the drug. Otherwise too great a shock, you see. Same time we administer cathartics and use hyoscyne as an antidote. End of two weeks, hope to shut off medical treatment and let her system rebuild itself. That's when your main problem starts. Meantime, wish you'd stay close by to help the nurse, case Miss Banner becomes violent. Don't anticipate that, but always a possibility."

I said: "I've already moved in. I'll be sleeping in the room right next to her."

"Fine," he said. "Fine arrangement. Be handy if nurse needs you."

I turned to Mrs. Rand. "You have those locks installed?"

"Yes," she said, rummaging in her purse and producing three keys. "They're numbered one, two and three. One is the connecting door to your room, two the hall door and three the key to my bedroom."

I said: "Keep yours," took the other two and handed the hall key to Miss Livingston. "You can pass this on to the

other nurses as they change shift. There are no extras, so don't lose it."

Accepting the key, she started from the room, but I stopped her. "When Vivian's ready for bed, have her put on a robe and come back downstairs," I told her.

By the time the nurse returned with Vivian, Dr. Yoder and Alex had gone, Mrs. Rand had disappeared into the rear of the house, and I was alone in the drawing room. Vivian wore a flowered wrap-around housecoat over green nylon pajamas. Clenched fists were thrust into the housecoat pockets.

I went over to her, took her wrists and gently pulled her hands from her pockets. She raised them palm upward and looked at me questioninglly.

Smiling at her, I thrust my own hands into the pockets. One held a lace handkerchief and the other was empty.

"Any pajama pockets?" I asked.

She shook her head. "What are you doing? Searching me?"

I said: "You catch on quick. Wait right here," and went right on up to her room.

I wasted fifteen minutes going over every inch of the bathroom and bedroom before I finally found it under a hat in a hat-box on the closet's rear shelf. It was a compact little outfit neatly assembled in a small tin box; an alcohol lamp of the type found in toy chemistry sets, a small test tube, two teaspoons, a bottle of innocent looking pills and an hypodermic syringe with several extra needles.

Returning to the drawing room, I handed the box to Miss Livingston. "Better turn this over to Dr. Yoder."

Vivian's eyes burned at me with sudden anger. "What right have you to search my room?" she demanded in a high voice.

I said: "We fathers make our own rules. Go on up to bed."

EXCEPT for one or two incidents, the next two weeks was a period of utter boredom for me. I had literally nothing to do but sit in my room and wait for the nurse to call me if Vivian grew violent, which she never did. She grew irritable, and her complexion turned muddy and oily from constant sweating. Her eyes reddened and streamed gallons of water, her fingers twitched and occasionally she sobbed with pain in her body joints, and she lost weight until her cheeks were gaunt. But she kept her mind.

To me she seemed pretty sick, but Dr. Yoder seemed pleased with her progress. He stopped by every day, examined Vivian, boomed a few hearty jests and went away with an air of satisfaction.

Norman Sheridan came every day too, asked if Vivian were well enough to have visitors, and nodded understandingly when the nurse informed him she was not. Whereupon he would retire to the drawing room with Mrs. Rand, drink a cup of tea and devour a prodigious amount of sugared cookies.

The first incident to break the boredom was when Nellie, the ancient housekeeper, let Vivian out of her room. She only got as far as her aunt's bedroom, because I discovered it almost at once. When no answer came to my rap on Vivian's door, I unlocked it, found the room empty and the door to Mrs. Rand's room open.

When she heard me enter, Vivian slammed shut the bureau drawer she was rifling, turned her back to the bureau and crouched like a cornered animal, her red-ringed eyes spitting hate at me and her lips pulled back from her teeth.

"What are you looking for, Vivian?" I asked gently.

"A handkerchief." Her voice was a sullen whine.

"I'll have the nurse bring you one. Better get back to bed."

Mrs. Rand's key lay on her dressing table. I picked it up, looked at it, laid it down again and left it there. After seeing Vivian safely relocked in her room, I went downstairs to give Mrs. Rand a verbal blast.

"But I know nothing about it," Vivian's aunt protested. "The key was on my dresser."

"It's still on the dresser," I said. "You simply left the door unlocked."

"I most certainly did not," Mrs. Rand denied. "I tried it very carefully before I came downstairs."

We questioned the servants then, and Nellie readily admitted her guilt. "Can't clean Miss Vivian's room less I open the door, can I?" she asked belligerently. "Can't walk through no closed door."

"You have the nurse let you in and out," I said. "If Vivian gets out again, I'll skin you alive."

She sniffed disdainfully. "Bigger fellers than you tried that and got set on their haunches."

"And you keep that key in your possession," I told Mrs. Rand. "Don't leave it lying on your dresser again."

The second incident occurred not more than an hour later, when Alex Carson made his single visit during Vivian's illness. It was his sole visit because I afterward told him if he stuck his nose inside the house again, I'd break it off even with his face.

I was in the back yard when he called. Every afternoon I spent a half hour there getting some fresh air in my lungs while Mrs. Rand took over my watch. When I came back into the house Mrs. Morgan, the 7:00 A. M. to 3:00 P. M. nurse, met me with fire in her eyes.

"A man named Carson was here and got into Miss Banner's room," she announced indignantly.

"He was?" I asked, mildly irked, but not particularly disturbed.

"Come look at our patient."

I followed her indignant back up the stairs to Vivian's room. Thrusting her key into the door, Mrs. Morgan flung it open and dramatically pointed to the patient, who sat upright in bed talking to Mrs. Rand, who was seated in a bedside chair.

Vivian's complexion was no longer muddy, and there was even a touch of color in her cheeks. Her eyes were still red-ringed, but they were clear and waterless, and the pupils were contracted to points.

She waved at me gaily. "Hello, Daddy."

"Take her in my room," I told Mrs. Morgan. "Search her while you've got her there. If she won't let you, call me."

Vivian docilely allowed herself to be led through the connecting door. Mrs. Rand watched silently while I went over every inch of the bedroom, bathroom and closet.

"What are you looking for?" she asked, when I finally gave up.

I ignored her question. "How did Carson get in here?"

"I let him in. Vivian asked to see him. Why?"

"Were you here all the time?"

"No. Vivian asked to see him alone. Why are you asking this?"

"Because your niece is doped to the heels. Starting right now all visitors will be referred to me. No one uses your key but yourself."

She put her nose in the air and tried to curdle me through her distorting eyeglasses. "Alex Carson wouldn't give Vivian morphine. The whole idea's ridiculous."

"Did you give it to her?"

"Of course not!"

"That leaves Alex," I said.

Mrs. Morgan brought Vivian back into the room and shook her head before I could ask if her search had turned up any drug on Vivian. I told her to throw

her patient back in bed and went downstairs to phone.

After twenty minutes of trying, I finally caught Alex at home. To put it conservatively, by that time I was mad.

"Alex," I said, "I knew you were a shyster, but I didn't know you peddled dope."

"What are you talking about?" he asked. I told him my plans for his nose and hung up.

CHAPTER FOUR

Human Again

THE second two weeks were more interesting, because I had something to do. Vivian was allowed up now, though she still spent much of her time in bed. When she was up she moped around the house dispiritedly, spending most of her time yawning and incessantly smoking cigarettes, and the rest of it trying to sneak out without my catching her. Once she tried violence and put a long scratch on my cheek, but the next meal she had to eat from the mantel. After that she kept her distance.

The nurses had been discharged at the end of the second week, and I now carried both the key to the door between my room and Vivian's and the key to Vivian's hall door. Mrs. Rand still had the third.

I let Vivian pick her own bedtime, but each night when she retired, I carefully locked her in and left her there until she pounded on the connecting door the next morning. Mrs. Rand had instructions to ignore pounding on her door.

By the end of the fourth week Vivian began to look human again. She was thin and extremely nervous and she tired easily, but her complexion began to freshen and her eyes to clear. Dr. Yoder decided she was well enough to leave the house.

"Now your real job begins," he told me. "Amazing, success you've had so far. Be nice if you can keep it up." He looked at me, not very hopefully.

"I'll keep it up," I said.

Up till then Vivian shrank from any contacts because of embarrassment at her appearance. Even after she was allowed up, she returned to her room when Norman Sheridan made his daily call, or when any other visitor arrived. But now she blossomed forth all at once.

At Vivian's request I ordered a beauty operator and a dressmaker, both of my own choosing, to report to the Rand home at nine the next morning. They spent three hours together locked in Vivian's room, and when at noon the rap on my door to let them out came, Vivian was again a beautiful woman.

The green knit suit she wore had been subtly altered to compensate for a loss of twelve pounds, changing her thinness to a willowy slenderness. And expert make-up had converted gaunt hollows to interesting high cheek bones. She wasn't the same woman who had visited my apartment nearly seven weeks before, but she was just as beautiful a woman.

"I want to go out to lunch," she informed me imperiously.

I let her have a wolf whistle. "We'll look like beauty and the beast."

For the first time since she had gotten up, she smiled at me, proving that even though she doesn't like you, no woman can resist a compliment.

Norman Sheridan and Mrs. Rand were together in the drawing room when Vivian and I entered. Sheridan heaved his soft bulk erect and let a smile of delight slowly spread across his round face.

"Well, well," he said. "The cocoon has opened and the butterfly emergeth."

"My dear," said Mrs. Rand. "You look stunning."

Being realistic about my own beauty, I deduced they were speaking to Vivian

and not to me, so I kept my mouth shut. A flush of pleasure added even more loveliness to Vivian's face.

"We're going out to lunch," she told Mrs. Rand.

"How nice," Vivian's aunt said. She looked at me quietly. "Do be careful of her."

Vivian frowned slightly. "I won't run away, Aunt Grace."

"I didn't mean that," Mrs. Rand protested. "But you're still weak, my dear. Don't overdo it."

Mrs. Rand loaned us the Packard, complete with its sullen chauffeur, Harry. Harry had been avoiding me ever since I moved into the house, probably in deference to our onetime unfriendly relationship. As far as I was concerned, he had served his time and bygones were bygones, so I winked at him in the rear view mirror as we settled back in our seat. But instead of looking reassured, his face turned pale and he clashed the gears in starting.

Vivian chose the Jefferson to dine, and lunch was pleasant except for a heightened and false vivaciousness on the part of my companion. From across the room it probably looked as though she hung on my every word and replied with delightful banter, but behind her tightly fixed smile her mind was turned inward on her own thoughts. Half the time my remarks got no answer at all, and the rest of the time the answers bore little relation to the questions. Our conversation sounded like a Marx brothers' script.

A choice example was when she brought up the subject of her mother's death. I had just remarked that the waitress was slow with our coffee.

"Do you think the police have forgotten about it?" she asked musingly.

"Our coffee?" I said, puzzled.

"It's been over a month now."

"About ten minutes," I said. "It just

seems long . . ." I stopped because her blank eyes told me she was a thousand miles away.

"Vivian," I said.

"I don't believe the police are doing a thing. But I'll bet you could solve the case, if you put your mind to it." She smiled brightly at me. "Now that I'm well and really don't need you any more, I think I'll hire you to find my mother's murderer."

"Vivian."

"So much time has passed, you really should start right now. Right after lunch. You can take Harry and I'll take a taxi home."

"Vivian."

I got her attention, and also that of the tables on all four sides of us. "No," I said more softly.

She smiled at me weakly, once again back in the present. Then her smile brightened and she rose. "Excuse me a moment."

Pushing back my chair, I dropped a ten dollar bill on the table in case we weren't coming back, and said: "I'll go with you."

One eyebrow quirked up in amusement, she shrugged and started across the floor. I followed her across the dining room, through the hotel lobby to a door reading, "Women." She grinned at me quizzically and pushed through the door.

LONG ago I had decided that once Vivian was allowed out of the house, it would be impossible to keep her in sight for six months. The only possible way to keep her from morphine was to give her some rope, locate her sources of drug, and eliminate the sources.

So instead of foolishly waiting outside the women's room, I ducked out the hotel's side door, loped to the alley and got the windows of the room under ob-

servation. I arrived just in time to see her drop lightly to the ground.

When she turned my way, I pulled back my head and faded into the cigar store located at the alley corner. Through the display window glass I saw her stop in front of the store, look in all directions and enter one of the line of cabs parked at the curb.

As soon as she settled back in its interior, I was out of the cigar store and into the taxi immediately behind hers.

"Keep the guy pulling out in sight," I told the cabbie. "But don't make him suspicious."

He dropped his flag. "Copper?"

I said: "No," and let a ten flutter into the seat beside him. My expense account was mounting.

At the end of the first block Vivian peered through her cab's rear window, and I slouched down until my driver's back cut off my view. Apparently her one look satisfied her, because she didn't check again.

Our first stop was the Merchant's National Bank. Vivian's taxi came to a halt in front of the bank and we pulled in a quarter block behind it. The other cab waited, so I remained in mine until Vivian came out again.

I suspected she wouldn't be long and she would come out mad. If she were trying to get hold of some money, she was going to discover one of the disadvantages of being declared legally incompetent was that you can't cash checks on your own account. It took my signature to get any of her money out of the bank.

In about three minutes she came out, and even from a quarter block away I could see her face was dark red. When she slammed shut the cab door, it nearly broke the glass.

Her next stop was in front of the Uptown Personal Loan Company. This took ten minutes, but the only result was

an even more flushed face and a still harder slam of the cab door.

For the next ten minutes Vivian's taxi wandered aimlessly, while its occupant apparently thought things over. Then it picked up speed and started decisively in the direction of the water front. It stopped a block from the Mississippi in front of an unsafe looking three story building.

In this neighborhood of sidewalk fruit stands and dilapidated one man shops, a taxi was more noticeable than in the uptown section, so I had my driver roll past her taxi and park in the next side street.

When I rounded the corner on foot the other taxi still waited, but Vivian was not in evidence. Unhurriedly I drew abreast of the cab and, without glancing at the driver, turned into the entrance in front of which he was parked.

The building was old and needed airing. A single naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling lit its windowless foyer, disclosing worn stairs ascending on either side and a variety of cigarette stubs and other litter on the floor. On the wall exactly between the two sets of stairs was a faded building directory.

Glancing over the half-dozen directory names, which included a chiropractor, a job printer, a seed company, two novelty wholesalers and a private detective, I settled on the last.

"Joseph Alamado, bonded investigator, room 209," the notice read. I had heard of Joe, and he was no credit to the profession.

Taking the left stairs to the second floor, I passed the print shop and two empty offices before I came to 209. Its plain wooden door repeated the directory's legend. Opening it softly, I pushed into a drab waiting room containing only a black leather sofa, an iron ash stand and a dusty magazine rack. Across the waiting room voices came from behind

another plain wooden door on which was painted the single word, "Private."

Leaving the hall door ajar, I crossed to the inner door and leaned one ear against it.

"You know I'll pay you," Vivian Banner was saying in a tone of tight desperation. "I'll bring the money tomorrow."

"You can have the stuff tomorrow," a heavy masculine voice said. After a timed pause, it added: "If you bring the money." There was no sympathy in the voice, and it definitely disapproved of credit transactions.

"Just a shot, then. One shot to carry me over. Against tomorrow's order."

No reply came from the man, but I guessed he had shaken his head. Vivian's voice grew wheedling. "I've always liked you, Joe. I'd be awfully grateful. I'd be so grateful I couldn't refuse you anything at all."

Joe's tone was heavily bored. "I deal in cash, lady. Cold, hard cash. Period."

For so long there was silence, I thought Vivian was turning to leave, and quietly started to leave myself. But her voice, low and vicious, brought me back.

"You rotten, sneaking vulture," she said. "I've poured thousands into your filthy hands. Listen to me." Her voice sank till I could barely hear it. "The police would love to know how many thousands—and what it was for!"

A chair scraped back and Joe said sharply: "Just a minute!"

Silence again, until Joe's heavy voice explained reasonably: "You know I don't stock it like a grocery store does apples. I buy when my customers order."

"You've got it right in this office!"

"No, lady. I can get it in an hour, but it takes cash."

"You're lying! You always had it before."

"Sure," Joe agreed. "But I always knew when you were coming. You ain't been around lately."

"All right," Vivian said. "I'll wait an hour while you go for it. I can pay you tomorrow. Honestly."

"Sorry, lady. I ain't got the money to advance. I can't get credit either, you know."

Vivian's voice again sank to a vicious whisper. "Unless I leave here with at least one shot, I'll go straight to the police from here!"

Neither spoke for a long time. Finally Joe said: "You wouldn't want to do that. You'd never get any then."

Vivian's laugh was slightly hysterical. "I'll never get it anyway. At least I can pay you back for some of the torture you've caused me."

For a second time her chair scraped back, and for a second time Joe said: "Just a minute!"

A period of silence ensued before Joe said slowly: "I could fix you up tomorrow, lady, but I couldn't raise you a shot today even if you threatened to phone Edgar Hoover."

"What time tomorrow?" Vivian asked eagerly.

Joe's voice grew persuasive. "Listen, lady. You're well on the way to cure. Why not be smart and stay off the junk?"

"What time tomorrow?" Vivian repeated. Then she said: "How do you know that I've been taking treatment lately?"

"I keep track of my clients."

For a long time neither said anything. Then Vivian asked: "What time tomorrow?"

"Phone me at noon," Joe said resignedly.

"That's too late. Make it earlier."

"Noon," Joe's voice was definite.

"All right," Vivian said crossly. "Noon."

SHE moved toward the door and I faded back into the hallway, timing the click made by the hall door's closing to coincide with the noise of the other door opening. By the time Vivian reached the hall, I was halfway down the stairs.

But when I reached my taxi and we had swung around the block, Vivian's cab had already pulled away. We caught it two blocks farther on.

As straight as he could go without cutting across vacant lots, Vivian's driver headed for the Rand home. When the cab stopped, Vivian immediately stepped out and ran up the walk to the house. I told my driver to park behind the other vehicle.

"Wait again?" the cabbie asked when I climbed out.

"No."

"That'll be two-thirty then."

I said: "Take it out of the ten I gave you and keep the change."

"Oh," he said. "I thought that was extra."

I gave him the fishy eye and he grinned. "No harm in trying, is there?"

Stopping next to Vivian's cab, I asked the driver: "She tell you to wait?"

"No. Just went in for money to pay me off."

"What's the fare?"

"Two-sixty."

I said: "You guys ought to standardize your rates," gave him three ones and turned toward the house.

At the front door Vivian met me, holding a five dollar bill in her hand. I flicked it away from her.

"You can't handle money," I said. "You're mentally incompetent."

She looked at me expressionlessly, glanced past me to see that her taxi was gone, and without a word turned and reentered the drawing room. I followed and found the inevitable tea party in session. Mrs. Rand, Claude Banner, Dr.

Yoder and Norman Sheridan all sat around holding cups.

I nodded to the group generally and handed Mrs. Rand the five. "I told you not to give Vivian money."

"She said there was a taxi."

"Don't do it again."

Her thick eyeglasses flashed hostility. "You needn't press the point in front of company."

I glanced over the group. "Nobody here who doesn't know what's wrong with Vivian."

Returning to the hall, I phoned the head waiter at the Jefferson and asked him to find Harry and tell him to come on home. While I was phoning, Vivian and Mrs. Rand passed and went on up the stairs. I hung up and returned to the drawing room.

"Where you been?" I asked Claude Banner, none too politely.

He looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"You haven't called to see your step-daughter once."

"Had to fly to Mexico City again," he said in a reasonable tone. "Just got back about an hour ago."

Mrs. Rand came back into the room, minus Vivian.

"Vivian's lying down," she told me. "She doesn't want to be disturbed."

"Lock your door?"

She looked nettled. "Yes."

Deliberately needling her, I asked: "Mind if I look in your room and check?"

She looked even more nettled, but said coldly: "If you wish."

Upstairs I found all three doors to Vivian's room locked. Not caring to rejoin the tea party crowd, I stayed in my room until the guests departed. About five-thirty I heard Mrs. Rand and Vivian talking in Vivian's room, and then a door opened and shut again as Mrs. Rand left. I continued to lie on

my back and stare at the ceiling until time for dinner, then I knocked on Vivian's door.

She answered through the panel, but I never saw her alive again. The next morning I found her body . . .

Harry's face was pale and frightened when I slipped into the front seat beside him.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked.

"Nothing."

He started up, killed the engine and had to use the starter again. I decided Mrs. Rand must have told him of Vivian's death.

"Four-hundred block on Second Street," I told him.

"Mrs. Rand wants me to stop by Mr. Sheridan's on the way," Harry said diffidently. "His phone's out of order and she wants him to come over."

"I'm in a hurry."

"It's right on the way."

"Make it snappy, then," I said.

We rolled past Forest Park, made a neat right turn and swung into the driveway of Norman Sheridan's big brick home. The garage doors were open and Harry wheeled the car right through them. Behind us the doors slid shut.

I looked angrily at Harry, started to open my mouth, and closed it again when a voice spoke to me through the side window. "Good morning, Mr. Moon."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Bloody Shroud

I GLANCED sidewise at the round, smiling face of Norman Sheridan. A .45 automatic was half-smothered in one doughy hand, and it was leveled at my ear.

"Move very carefully, Mr. Moon," he said softly. "I understand you can draw

and fire a pistol with astonishing rapidity, but you can't possibly do it in the time it takes to press a trigger. If you make any abrupt movements, I won't wait to decide their purpose. I'll simply fire."

I sat still without saying anything.

"Get out slowly, Mr. Moon. Very slowly."

My hand reached for the door handle in slow motion, and I slid from the car at the same rate of speed.

"Turn around and raise your hands, Mr. Moon."

I did as directed, and Harry climbed from his seat and removed the P-38 from my shoulder holster. Sheridan motioned with his pistol, and I preceded him through a side door into the house's cellar.

Except for the space taken up by a furnace, the entire basement had been converted into a combination office and laboratory. Placed diagonally in one corner was a desk, behind which was a double-width swivel chair. Hanging from the chair's back was Sheridan's heavy cane. Around three sides of the basement ran a wide, waist-high shelf on which were screened cages of buzzing insects, petrie dishes and assorted equipment.

Motioning me to a chair in front of the desk, Sheridan oozed his own vast bulk into the wide chair behind it. He carefully placed the cocked automatic within reach of his hand, leaned forward on his elbows and favored me with a beaming smile. Harry stood in the corner, shuffling from one foot to the other and avoiding my eyes.

"Harry is frightened to death of you, Mr. Moon," Sheridan said. "Your name induces quite some fear among the lesser criminals." He chuckled mildly. "I understand they even carefully address you as 'Mister' when they meet you, a habit you have unimaginatively incul-

cated by beating them up when they fail to use the title. Now, I call you 'Mister' also, but merely because I prefer to be formal."

I said: "Before you fall asleep at the sound of your own voice, get to the point."

For an instant his eyes frosted over, then he smiled again. "Directness is an admirable trait. I won't keep you in suspense. We're waiting for a phone call."

I thought this over without growing any wiser, and tried again. "Any particular reason you want my company?"

He only smiled, so I kept on. "I suppose you wouldn't have come out in the open like this unless it was urgent to sidetrack me. And since I was headed for a dope peddler, it follows you must not have wanted me to get to him."

The smile continued, bland and friendly.

"So we come to the riddle of how you knew where I was going," I said, smiling just as blandly. "And the only sensible answer is that Harry must have phoned you before we left the house. Then, by the process of logical deduction I learned in my correspondence course in private detecting, a number of interesting things follow." I ticked them off on my fingers for him. "One: Harry is your employee, and his job as chauffeur for Mrs. Rand is only a blind. Two: Joe Alamado is also your employee, or you wouldn't care whether I got to him or not. Three: you're the head of the local dope ring." I stopped and looked at him questioningly.

But all I got was a lot more smile and a deprecating shake of his melon head. "You are wasting your time, Mr. Moon. We are merely waiting for a phone call."

Suddenly his eyes fixed on a fly which had settled to the desk top in front of him. With instant coordination one hand shot out and cupped the whirring

insect. Carefully he worked two fingers of his other hand into his clenched fist until he had the fly's legs gripped between the thumb and index finger. Then he calmly stripped its wings and dropped it back on the desk to run in drunken circles.

As though there had been no interruption, he said: "I have no intention of answering any of your provocative questions, Mr. Moon. I'm sure I couldn't think up any explanation for detaining you which would sound more plausible than the one you've deduced, so I won't bother to either affirm or deny your accusations." He raised a thick index finger and shook it at me. "I never underestimate opponents, Mr. Moon. I have studied your history very carefully, and am fully aware of your talents. You have a bulldog tenacity which I consider much more dangerous to my interests than if you were intelligent. The only way to beat a man like you is to catch him unaware and crush him at once. Like this!" He suddenly slapped his fat palm over the wobbling insect on his desk.

I said: "You flatter me."

"No. As I say, I have studied your history. I probably know as much about you as you do yourself."

"For instance?"

Studying me through half-shut eyes, he began to recite: "You were born on the north side in a neighborhood of—ah—lower middle-class families."

"Lower lower-class," I said.

He bent his head courteously. "As you please. Your father was an immigrant laborer, and died when you were three. Your mother died when you were seven, and you and your brother and sister were placed in the state orphanage. Both your brother and sister were adopted, but you stayed until you were eighteen, were turned loose with a high school education and became a dock worker. In a

rather rough environment, you soon established yourself as pretty nearly the roughest element, and it was about this time that you received the slight brass knuckle disfigurement your face still bears.

"At twenty you won the Golden Gloves tournament, turned professional, fought three setups which you won by knockouts in the first round; then decided to beat up your manager and, in the ensuing investigation by the boxing commission during which you refused to explain your action, were permanently barred from the ring. Just what was your reason?" he asked curiously.

"He bored me. He talked much too much."

Sheridan smiled benevolently. "Well put, Mr. Moon. I won't bore you much longer. At twenty-one you went to work for the Jones Detective Agency, stayed with them two years and then opened your own business. You've been working alone ever since, with the exception of four years in the Army, and have built an excellent reputation."

I said: "You certainly went to a lot of trouble."

"In the Army you became first sergeant of one of the famous Ranger companies, and succeeded in winning the Legion of Merit, the Silver Star twice, the Bronze Star Medal, the Purple Heart and a theater ribbon with a number of campaign stars on it."

"You forgot the Good Conduct Medal," I said.

"You also succeeded in losing your right leg."

"The left," I said, just to be cantankerous. "Your sources of information must have been lousy."

He frowned, and a tinge of annoyance was in the frown. "Cover him," he said to Harry, and watched from the corner of his eye until Harry got my P-38 leveled at my head.

HE HEAVED himself erect by holding the desk edge in both hands, grasped his cane by the shaft and rounded the desk to bulge over me like an enormous balanced rock. Without speaking, he slammed the heavy crook across my left instep.

If he had not telegraphed the blow, I probably would have shot clear to the ceiling, for the pain was terrific. As it was, even though it felt as though every bone in my foot was broken, I managed a heckling grin.

"You'll bust your cane," I said. "That's aluminum."

Again he raised the cane and brought it down, this time at my right foot. I jerked back my leg and let the cane head crash to the floor.

"Easy," I said, not grinning. "That one bruises."

For a moment he glared down at me, his eyes nearly closed. Then he swung around impatiently and lumbered back to his desk. Leaning back in his oversized swivel chair, he latched hands across his stomach and waited for his color to recede. When it finally did, he revived the benevolent smile.

"A minor point," he said indifferently. "On the whole, my sources of information were excellent."

Since this seemed to call for no answer, I just sat and looked at him. Sheridan looked back, and a conversational pause built up and lengthened. Then the silence was burst apart as the phone on his desk uttered a shrill peal.

Sheridan's body jerked and the gun leaped into his hand, pointed at me.

I laughed aloud. "I make a different noise, fatty. That was the phone."

His smile was a sickly, self-conscious version of the bland original as he laid the automatic back on the desk. Glancing at Harry to make sure I was still covered, he lifted the instrument from its cradle.

"Yes?"

I strained to hear the other voice, but it must have been pitched unusually low, for only a whisper of unintelligible sound trickled past Sheridan's ear.

"He's here and under control," Sheridan said.

A short dribble of sound issued from the receiver, and Sheridan said: "Delay is unnecessarily risky. Suppose he escapes?"

Again he listened. "Of course he's under control. But why delay? What's the point?"

This time the other party talked a long time while Sheridan frowned into space. Then he said: "It will be no harder to dispose of now than when we finally act."

I had an uncomfortable feeling he was referring to my body, and silently began to root for the other person to win the argument.

"All right," he said finally. "I'll meet you in thirty minutes. Usual place."

He hung up and glowered at me.

"So I get a reprieve?" I said. "Who was my benefactor?"

His expression relaxed into its habitual smile. "Reprieve? I have no idea what you're talking about."

Again placing both hands on the desk edge, he heaved himself upright. "Do you have any rope in the car, Harry?"

"Moon's got handcuffs in his pocket," Harry said.

"Mr. Moon, Harry," I snapped.

Harry wet his lips and shifted his eyes to my feet. Norman Sheridan laughed.

"Harry is being brave, Mr. Moon. Please don't embarrass him." He turned his eyes to Harry. "Take his handcuffs."

Picking up his automatic from the desk top, Sheridan motioned me to rise and turn around. When I complied with his pantomined directions, Harry reached under my coat and removed the cuffs from my pocket.

I turned back to face Sheridan then, and he swept his gun muzzle toward a stairway and followed behind when I started toward it. In single file, Harry bringing up the rear, we went clear to the second floor and stopped at a closed room.

"Open the door and go in," Sheridan said.

I obeyed his order and we entered a narrow bedroom containing a single bed, a dresser and one chair. The bed had an old-fashioned iron frame.

"Sit on the bed," Sheridan directed.

I swung around until I sat straight-legged in the center of the mattress. Sheridan tossed the handcuffs at me.

"Clip one link to the center bed rung."

I snapped the loop in place.

"Clip the other to your leg."

Automatically I moved my good leg forward and reached for the cuff. Sheridan's soft chuckle made me look up.

"You're a very enterprising man, Mr. Moon. Clamp it to your good leg."

Keeping my face expressionless, I locked the metal band around the ankle of my false right leg.

SATISFIED that I was adequately restrained, Sheridan tucked his automatic beneath his arm, informed Harry that he would be back about dark and went off to consult with his associates. Harry leaned the lone chair against the wall and sat with my P-38 in his hand, watching me steadily.

Every time I shifted position, Harry raised the pistol and pointed it at me. I noticed that it shook slightly in his hand.

"What are you scared of?" I asked.

"I'm not scared of anything."

"You're scared silly," I said. "Relax."

I reached toward my breast pocket for a cigar and the gun came up again. I paused with my fingers touching the cigar.

"Just getting a smoke."

Brooding, he watched me peel the cellophane, search my pockets for a match and light up. "You're crazy if you think I'm afraid of you, Moon," he announced abruptly.

"Mister Moon," I said.

"Mister Moon," he amended quickly.

I finished my cigar, yawned, lay back and went to sleep.

When I awoke, I turned my eyes in Harry's direction and he immediately centered the pistol muzzle between them. I grinned at him, raised myself to a sitting position and glanced at my wrist watch. It was just noon.

"What's for lunch?" I asked.

Harry wet his lips and remained silent.

"Don't I get fed?" I demanded.

"The boss said stay in here with you."

"Oh, sure," I said. "He also said he'd be back about dark. Do we starve?"

"I'm not leaving you out of my sight."

I shrugged. "O.K. I won't get any hungrier than you do. But if you went downstairs to rustle something up, how do you think I'd get out of here? Drag this bed through the window?"

Harry wet his lips again, then came over near the bed to lean forward and examine the locked handcuffs, keeping his pistol trained and carefully staying beyond my reach as he looked. With his left hand he reached out and shook the bed rungs to test their strength. He backed to the door, opened it by reaching behind himself and backed out. The door shut and the key turned quickly in the lock.

Rolling up my trouser, I loosened the harness of my false leg, pulled the stump free and swung my knees over the side of the bed. I pushed myself erect, balanced for a moment and hopped over to the wall next to the door. There I patiently waited for the next fifteen.

Finally a key turned in the lock and the door pushed open. Then Harry was standing with his back to me, one hand

on the door knob and the other bearing a tray on which rested a plate of sandwiches, two glasses of milk and my cocked pistol. He just stood there staring stupidly at my manacled leg on the bed.

My left arm went about his throat and my right knee raised to his back.

The crash of the tray was immediately followed by the crash of Harry's body beneath mine as he suddenly went limp, throwing us both off balance. I rolled clear and sat up. Harry had fainted.

It took less time to remove the cuff key from Harry's pocket, unlock my leg and strap it back where it belonged than it did to revive Harry. And when I finally got him awake, he took one look at me and fainted again.

The second time I threw water in his face, he stayed awake, but he was trembling so badly it took ten more minutes to convince him I wasn't intending to kill him on the spot. Finally he was in shape to walk, although he stumbled twice going down the stairs.

I opened the garage doors myself, told Harry to get behind the wheel of the Packard, and slid in beside him.

"Four-hundred block on Second Street," I said.

Harry killed the engine once before he got the car to move, then sideswiped both sides of the driveway in backing out. Normally he was a good driver, but en route to Joe Alamado's office he killed the engine at every light, clashed gears in starting and nearly had me as much a nervous wreck as himself.

In front of the decrepit building where Alamado kept his office, I clamped one cuff to Harry's wrist, the other around the steering column, took the car keys and left him to brood over his sins.

The drab reception room of Joe Alamado's office was empty. I opened the door marked "Private" and found Joe seated behind a cheap desk. He was a squat, narrow-browed man with patent-

leather hair slicked back over a nearly flat head. He looked up with a scowl.

I said: "Hello, Joe. We've never met, but you may have heard of me. I'm Manny Moon."

His eyes turned flat and expressionless.

"Get on your feet," I said patiently.

For another moment he remained motionless, then he slowly rose and advanced toward the door, one hand casually slipping into his coat pocket. He started to precede me through the door, suddenly twisted to face me, and his right arm flashed upward.

I let him bring his leather sap even with his ears before starting the eight inch jab I had been saving for him all day. It connected perfectly, breaking just at the point of impact. He did a back flip and went to sleep.

 HARRY'S eyes bugged out at me and his face turned yellow when I appeared carrying Joe Alamado like a sack of meal. Opening the rear car door, I dumped Joe in, climbed in beside him and leaned over the back seat to loosen the handcuffs. Then I tossed Harry the car keys.

"Back home," I said.

Nellie let us in, examined us sharply and went away muttering to herself. Herding my two captives toward the stairway, I spun Joe around, pushed his chest and let him sit down hard on the steps. "Stick out your left wrist," I said.

Peevishly he held out his arm. I snapped one cuff on it, passed the chain between the railings of the bannister and attached Harry to the other end.

"Don't wander off," I said, and went on into the drawing room.

Most everyone I expected to find was there: Mrs. Rand, Claude Banner, Dr. Yoder, Alex Carson, Norman Sheridan, Lieutenant Hannegan and, last but not least, Inspector Warren Day.

The moment I walked through the

door, Day bellowed: "Where you been, Moon?" and Norman Sheridan's hand snaked toward his chest.

"You'll get a hole in your head," I said coldly, ignoring Day and walking over to Sheridan.

I jerked him to his feet, spun him around until his back was toward me and cramped one fat arm against his spine. With my other hand I removed the .45.

"Cuffs," I said to Hannegan.

Hannegan, surprised, but quick on the uptake, moved over and snapped a steel band about the wrist of the arm I held.

Day thundered: "What you think you're doing, Moon?"

Still cramping Sheridan's arm, I dog-trotted him over to Claude Banner's chair, spun him around to face me and pushed him into Banner's lap. Banner let out a large, "Whoosh!" as three-hundred odd pounds smashed down on him, and before either knew what was happening, I snapped the other end of the cuffs to Banner's wrist.

Sheridan struggled from his seat to stand erect.

"That makes four packaged up for you," I said to the now speechless inspector. "The fifth is a lady."

Crossing to Mrs. Rand, I stood over her, looking down. "Your fat friend was remarkably careful not to implicate you. But no one else knew I was headed after Joe Alamado."

Warren Day shrieked in my ear: "Who's Joe Alamado?" His narrow nose was a pale bull's-eye in a beet-red face.

"I thought Mrs. Rand wouldn't have passed on the message I left for the police," I said. "He's an employee of Sheridan's and hers."

Reaching down, I hooked an index finger around the ribbon of her thick-lensed glasses and jerked them off her nose. The pupils of her weak, watery eyes were contracted to dots.

"We've got two murderers," I told in-

spector Day. "Claude Banner killed his wife, Mrs. Rand murdered Vivian . . ."

"I knew the whole setup was phoney when they started pinning the second murder on you," Warren Day told me over rye highballs at my apartment. "Not that I thought you above murder, but using cyanide was too smart for your lame brain. You'd simply have broken her neck."

Hannegan put in: "How'd the dope racket work?"

I SAID: "All five helped operate the ring. Mrs. Rand's husband committed suicide when he went broke in 1929, and the narcotic trade has been her source of income ever since. Norman Sheridan and Mrs. Rand directed operations, Claude Banner handled the smuggling through his frequent business trips to Mexico, and Joe Alamado was the distributor. Harry was general flunkey.

"Whether or not Mrs. Banner was part of the ring is unimportant now, but when she discovered her own daughter was an addict, she blew her lid and threatened to expose the whole deal. In an attempt to pacify her, the gang rigged up a quiet cure for Vivian. But I spilled the beans that the treatment might not work, and wasn't what Dr. Yoder recommended.

"Vivian didn't know that her whole family was involved in narcotic trade, but she did know Alamado was the distributor, and she knew her aunt was also a morphine addict. So the gang wanted her where they could watch her in case she broke under the cure and started making accusations. After Mrs. Banner left the Rand home that day, she laid down the law to Sheridan and her husband that Vivian was either going to be committed to a sanitarium, or she was going to the police. So Harry, Sheridan and Banner simply took her for a ride, dumped her body in the river and rigged

alibis for each other. Afterward Banner caught his plane."

"I follow all that," Hannegan said. "But how'd you know Banner was the one who pulled the trigger?"

"Simple psychology. Sheridan was too smart to do his own killing, and Harry didn't have the guts."

Warren Day said: "I still don't see why Mrs. Rand killed her niece. She must have been nuts."

"Next thing to it," I said. "She was full of dope, and her thinking wasn't quite sane. After Vivian's unsuccessful attempt to get morphine from Joe Alamado, she went back home, locked herself in her room and began brooding about the next day. Alamado had promised her a supply if she phoned him at noon, remember. Vivian had been off even medicinal doses for two weeks and was bearing up pretty well, but the idea of actually getting a shot worked on her mind until she couldn't stand to wait the night through.

"Vivian knew her aunt had a supply, because she'd swiped a shot during her treatment. I nearly caught her in the act, though I wasn't aware of it at the time. But when Mrs. Rand found Vivian all hopped up, she knew I'd ask embarrassing questions, so she deliberately let Alex Carson in to visit Vivian, hoping he'd get the blame. Her ruse worked, and I ordered Alex to stay away.

"The night Vivian died, she called in her aunt, demanded a shot of morphine and threatened to tell me Mrs. Rand was an addict if she didn't get it. Norman Sheridan had repeatedly warned Mrs. Rand to be careful with me around, and in her drug-punchy mind she thought if I discovered she was an addict, I'd follow through and learn all about the drug ring and the murder of Mrs. Banner. To quiet Vivian, her aunt promised to bring her a shot during the night. But she knew she could

never explain to me how Vivian got the shot, so when she brought the needle, it was filled with cyanide instead of morphine.

"After administering Vivian's last shot in the arm, she had Harry lean a ladder against the house, left her connecting door ajar with the key in it, and calmly went to bed.

"Neither Claude Banner nor Norman Sheridan knew she planned to kill Vivian until she phoned them next morning and told them what she had done. Both blew their lids, but there was nothing they could do but try to cover for her. She got hold of Sheridan in time for him to ad lib a quick plan to sidetrack me from getting to Joe Alamado. Once Sheridan showed his hand, he was cautious enough to want to dispose of me quick, but one of his partners phoned and talked him into waiting."

"That was Claude Banner," said Warren Day. "Banner convinced Sheridan they could pin Vivian's murder on you, but only if your subsequent death seemed accidental. He suggested a car accident, as though you smashed up trying to escape. And, of course, if Sheridan had put a bullet in you, it wouldn't have looked very accidental."

"How'd you tumble to Mrs. Rand?"

"I saw her eyes without their thick glasses. At the time I knew there was something strange about them, but it didn't register until I thought about it later. Then I realized her pupils were contracted just as Vivian's had been."

Day said: "They might have gotten away with it if Sheridan had won his phone argument with Banner."

"You sound disappointed," I said.

Mixing himself another drink, Day spread thin lips in a hurt smile. "You misjudge me, Manny. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you." He sampled his drink and nodded, "Not as long as you keep stocking this brand of rye."



I faced Jake and Carol in the office when the showdown came.

EENY-MEENY-MONEY—

I might have known, when I started keeping books for the Menagerie Club, that I'd wind up with a murder debit on the red side of the ledger.

I NEVER figured on it coming to murder. I never figured on that at all, or maybe I would have tried to stop it before it got so big.

Maybe my murder instinct was working that night in Jake Holder's Menagerie Club. But I didn't know it then.

We sat there in the Menagerie Club and Carol kept ordering Tom Collins. The bill kept climbing higher and higher. I knew we ought to get out, because I didn't have any more than ten dollars in my pocket and the bill was already fourteen. I'd had only two drinks, but I was



MURDER!

By VICTOR K. RAY

a lot drunker than anybody else in the place. I was drunk on Carol Devlin. You'll see her picture in the paper in a few days, and you'll see what I mean. She's one of those tall, classic types. Blonde hair, shoulder length. She's got green eyes that flash, a straight nose, a



firm, beautiful jaw line. She's got a look about her that says she knows what she wants. She does. I'll tell you this, every time I've ever looked at her, I've gotten a little dizzy. That night in the Menagerie Club, I was dizzier than usual. I couldn't seem to hang onto the fact that I was just a fifty dollar a week bookkeeper with ten dollars cash in my pocket. And the bill kept climbing higher and higher.

Carol said: "Bill, honey, I'm just having a wonderful time," and she held up her glass at the waiter. He had a full one in front of her almost before her empty touched the table.

I said: "Yeah."

Sometime later, Jake Holder came over to our table. He was a big, heavy-set guy with hard little eyes, black shiny hair, a swagger to his walk. He had a right to swagger, I guess. He had two hundred thousand dollars in cash in one safety deposit box that I know of.

I DIDN'T know it then, of course. He was just an unpleasant face to me. He owned the Menagerie Club. I knew that. He came over to the table, introduced himself, sat down. Pretty soon there was champagne sitting in a bucket of ice beside the table. This seemed perfectly all right to me.

Carol was having the time of her life. And pretty soon so was I.

I just barely remember when it came time to pay the bill we'd piled up before Jake Holder had come around with the champagne and all. The bill was twenty-two dollars, and I fumbled in my billfold a minute. Jake Holder said: "Just sign the check, Baldwin," like it was the most natural thing in the world. I signed the check and we left.

We stopped at Uncle Hank's All-Nite Eatery as usual on the way home, for coffee and hamburgers, and Carol said: "Are you going to take the job, Bill?"

"What job?"

"Why, the one Jake Holder offered you."

"I didn't know he offered me a job."

"Well, yes, of course, Bill. He said he needed an accountant. Why, he talked about it for twenty minutes. And you mean to say you don't remember it?"

Now that she mentioned it, it came back a little. That had been during the haziest part of the evening.

I said: "Oh. Sure."

"You said you'd think it over."

"I did? Yeah, I will."

"He said he'd pay you seventy-five a week, Bill."

I jumped a little when she said that.

"And he said there would be chance for advancement," she said. ". . . I'll think it over," I said.

"Call him tomorrow," said Carol. "And tell him you'll take it."

The next day I went back to work down at the Central Trucking Company. I thought about Jake Holder. I couldn't believe he'd been serious when he made the offer. Maybe he was drunk. Then, I thought about the job I had. It was a good one. I'd been promised a raise. I didn't make the call to Jake Holder.

That night I went around to see Carol.

The first thing she said was: "You didn't call Jake Holder."

"How did you know?"

"He called me and wanted to know why you hadn't called."

"And he still wanted me to work for him?"

"Well, of course. Naturally."

". . . Do you like this guy Holder?" I asked.

"I can't stand him." She snapped it out, and I knew she meant it. I felt better.

I walked down the length of the room, sat down on the divan. I patted the cushion beside me, and Carol sat down.

"Why won't you take the job?" she

asked. She put her cheek up against mine, and I began forgetting all about what we'd been talking about. She said again: "Why won't you, Bill?"

Call it murder instinct, if you want to. But the things I thought about the next day were a long way from murder. The job I had was a good one. I had the promise of a raise. I knew I could stay with Central Trucking as long as they lasted. They were a solid firm. Night clubs aren't generally thought to be very substantial businesses. And this guy, Jake Holder, didn't impress me as the world's most solid citizen.

I didn't call him. But he called me about four o'clock. I realized, of course, that Carol had given him my phone number down at work.

He said: "Baldwin, when are you coming to work for me?"

"... I haven't made up my mind yet, Mr. Holder."

"I need a man like you, Baldwin."

"Well, thanks."

"Come around to the club, and we'll talk it over."

I thought about the bill I owed him. I said: "Sure. Maybe we'll come around tonight."

"Fine," he said. "See you then, Baldwin."

I drew thirty-five dollars of my week's pay on a voucher. That was another thing about my job at Central Trucking. They were considerate, like that.

That night, Carol and I went back to the Menagerie Club.

I made Jake Holder let me pay the bill we'd run up a couple of nights ago, though he insisted it wasn't necessary. Our business with him that night was cash and carry. He mentioned the job once, but he didn't make a nuisance of himself talking about it. He and Carol danced several times, and then we left.

I said: "Do you like Jake Holder?"

"I can't stand him," she said again. "Why won't you take the job?"

"Did he talk to you about it?"

"Yes."

"Well," I said. "Maybe I will take it."

The next day, I kept thinking about it. Seventy-five a week looked good. It would mean Carol and I could get married, maybe. I hadn't even thought about that before, but now I did. I was crazy about her. I sat there at my desk, and half a dozen times I had my hand on the telephone, but I didn't call him. Something in me just wouldn't make the move.

AT FIVE o'clock I quit work, and walked out a little disgusted with myself, dreading to see Carol because I knew she would want to know why I hadn't called Jake Holder.

In front of the office, I saw this big car. It was a black Continental. I recognized Jake Holder sitting at the wheel. He leaned over, opened the door. "Hello, Baldwin."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Holder."

"Get in," he said. "I'll drive you home."

I got in. The big car slid away from the curb.

He said: "It's a good job. Your girl wants you to take it. I don't understand why you don't snap it up."

"To tell you the truth," I said, "I don't either."

Instead of turning to the right which would have been toward where I lived, he turned left, towards his club.

In a few minutes, he pulled up at the Menagerie Club, and we went in. The office we went into was something for the books. It was done in a pastel green and chocolate, the desk was tear-drop shaped, there was a portable bar.

"This is your office," he said.

"... Mine ..."

"Come around tomorrow afternoon, and we'll talk over the details of the job. And now, tonight, let's have a small celebration. Go get your girl, and bring her over here. We'll have a little party."

"All right."

"And Baldwin."

"Yes?"

"I've decided to start you at ninety a week."

I walked out feeling weak in the knees, but that was all right, because I was walking on clouds and I didn't need strength in my knees. I felt like if I just flipped my hands a little, I'd float right up to heaven.

The next afternoon I showed up at the Menagerie Club, and it was a good thing he hadn't said come around in the morning, because the butterflies were still doing nip-ups in my stomach. There hadn't been anything "little" about Jake Holder's party.

He showed me the ledgers and files covering the financial side of the Menagerie Club. They were just a routine set of debits and credits. I noticed the last entry was a couple of weeks ago.

I said: "Where is the guy who kept these books before me?"

Holder looked at me quickly. "He took a trip . . ."

It didn't take me long to see that the Menagerie Club was a losing proposition.

It was almost a month before he showed me the second set of books. It wasn't really a set of books, just one thin ledger. But the entries were big—up in the thousands of dollars. I don't know whether you understand how a set of accounts are kept, but usually they are divided into two big general classifications; one involving expenses, the other involving income. Then, these are broken down into smaller accounts. And usually, there is some paper record of each item entered. Such as bills, vouchers, or maybe cancelled checks.

But this thin ledger Jake Holder showed me was a little different. There was one account called "Income," and another called "Expenses," and that was all. Beside each entry under "Income" there was a set of initials, such as SWK, or TFG. All in all, there were about twenty different sets of initials. And under "Expenses," there was just one set of initials—LLL.

And there were no bills, vouchers, or cancelled checks. About once a week, Jake Holder handed me a little piece of scrap paper on which was written such things as: "Income—SWK—\$2,300," or, "Income—TFG—\$1,000," etc. Once every two weeks, he handed me a slip marked: "Expense—LLL—\$2,000."

It was the simplest set of books I ever kept.

It was hard to attach any reality to these accounts. Then I began meeting a few of the characters who showed up regularly at the Menagerie Club. One day, Jake Holder dropped into my office with a thin, blond guy, and said: "Baldwin, I'd like you to meet Stanley Kolmer." He turned to the blond guy, who extended his hand. "Kolmer, this is Bill Baldwin."

I shook hands with the guy, and said: "Stanley W. Kolmer?" I was thinking of those initials, "SWK."

The guy gave me a funny look. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, that's it."

Later that afternoon, Jake Holder handed me a slip of paper: "Income—SWK—\$1,700." A few minutes later, he came back into my office, and set a small pigskin bag on my desk. He said: "You want to take a drive downtown?"

I said: "I don't mind."

He handed me the bag. "Let's go."

We walked out together, through the back door to the parking area. I started to get in his big car.

"No," he said. "You drive your car. I'll follow in mine."

I started to hand him the bag. "No," he said. "You carry the bag."

I said: "I don't get it."

"You don't have to 'get it,'" he snapped. "Just carry the bag. Drive downtown to the First National Bank."

I went over to my car, and got in. I sat there a few minutes thinking about it. I took hold of the catch on the pigskin bag, but it was locked.

I drove downtown, and Jake Holder's black Continental was in my rear view mirror all the time. I drove into a parking lot, and it eased up alongside. We got out, walked around the corner to the First National. We turned down the stairway to the right of the lobby, where a sign pointed, "Safety Deposit Boxes." We signed the register at the bottom of the stairs, and Holder identified me as his confidential secretary. We went into the booth, and I found out what was in the pigskin bag I'd been carrying. Cash. Fifteen thousand dollars worth of it. Added to what he already had tied up in neat little bundles in the safety deposit box, it made an even two hundred thousand!

I was weak in the knees when we walked out, and it wasn't all right. I wasn't walking on clouds. I needed all the strength I ever had. Jake Holder's small, hard eyes were black and expressionless when he got in his car. His mouth was pulled to the side in what might have been a grin.

I DROVE to Carol's place. I hadn't seen her for a couple of days. On the way, I thought about what had happened. Jake Holder had let me carry fifteen thousand dollars in cash downtown to the bank. That might have been because he was afraid to do it himself. If anybody got knocked off for his money, it would be me. That was swell. I could see I was working for a nice guy. I felt uneasiness and uncertainty build up in

me. I tried not to think of where he got the money in the first place.

I buzzed Carol's apartment in the entrance foyer, and the door clicked open. I ran up the stairs without waiting for the elevator. I raised my hand to knock on her door, and it opened. She stood there, blonde, beautiful, self-possessed.

She said: "Close your eyes, Bill."

I closed them. She took my hand, led me into her apartment.

"Now," she said. "Open them."

I opened my eyes, then I shut them quick. I was in a strange place. You don't know how strange. I opened them again, slowly. The place was done over—in pastel green and chocolate and other assorted colors. There was a tear-drop shaped coffee table. The chairs were bizarre numbers with some kind of long-staple fur covering. The red wooden-based reading lamp that I used to knock over was gone from the table at the end of the divan. So was the table. The lights were all concealed, and I couldn't tell where they came from. The room seemed a lot larger.

I said: "What happened?"

"As if you didn't know."

"Well, I *don't* know."

"But Jake said—"

"Who?"

"Jake Holder. Your boss. Remember?"

Yeah, I remembered. And I got the easy, familiar way she tossed off his name.

After a minute, I said: "What's been going on?"

"Nothing."

"This decorating job must have cost a couple of thousand."

"He said he was doing you a favor."

"Doing *me* a favor?"

"That's what he said."

"Are you sure you don't like this guy, Holder?"

"I can't stand him!" She bit the words

off. Her eyes looked directly into mine. That was the funny part. She meant it. I knew she did.

I pulled her close to me. I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her, and began getting that old dizzy feeling.

Then I said: "Carol, let's get married." I felt my voice shake in my throat.

She pulled back. She turned around with her back to me. She looked around the room.

I said it again, slower. "Let's get married." My voice hung there in the air. A hard knot was in my stomach, a granny knot tied with wet rope.

She turned around slowly. ". . . I'll have to think it over, Bill" A little muscle at the side of her mouth trembled. Her eyes found mine for a second, then anchored at a spot in the air near my left shoulder.

Suddenly, I was running down the stairs, and out into the street. Something had happened between Carol and me, and I didn't know what it was. I was afraid to think about it. I knew only that it centered around Jake Holder and my job with him.

I went to the Menagerie Club early the next morning. I went through the back door, into the bar, toward my office. A couple of bartenders were polishing up. Jake Holder and a tall, slim guy were standing at the bar having a drink. I nodded, and went on. Holder reached out one of his big hands, grabbed my arm.

"Baldwin, I'd like you to meet Tedford F. Garland," he said. "Ted, this is Bill Baldwin. He keeps my accounts straight."

I spoke to the guy, and went on into my office.

A minute later, Holder came in.

"What's troubling you, Baldwin?"

"I'm hired as your accountant. Right?"

"That's right."

"Then stay out of my personal life. Stay out of my girl's apartment."

"All right."

"I don't like your taste."

"All right, Baldwin," he said mildly. "Don't get excited." He turned to go into his own office.

"Wait a minute."

He turned around.

"You'd better get whoever does your decorating over to Carol's apartment, and let him put it back the way it was."

"I thought that decorating job would be a nice surprise for you," he said slowly.

"I'm sorry I don't appreciate it." I pushed my desk phone in his direction, and he walked back from the door.

He picked up the telephone. "I guess your girl will like it. Having her apartment torn up again." He put his hand down on the dial. "You know, I wasn't the only one who thought the decorating job was a good idea. She thought so, too." He dialed the number. "This'll put you in solid with her."

He was right, of course. The damage was already done. Tearing all that stuff out of her apartment would probably make it worse.

I said: "All right, Holder. . . Forget it."

He put the telephone back on its cradle. "I'm glad you reconsidered, Baldwin." He went to the door of his office, and opened it. "Will you come into my office a minute?" he said.

I went in.

He sat down behind his desk. He shoved a bill across the desk to me. It was from the Acme Decorating Company—an itemized bill for the job on Carol's apartment. It was made out to me. It came to \$1,875.50.

Holder said quietly: "Write a check on the club account to pay for it. Just sign my name, then countersign it with your own name. The bank will pass it."

"All right." I walked across to the door leading into my office.

"And Baldwin—"

I turned around. "Yes?"

"I'm increasing your salary to a hundred and twenty-five a week." He held out a check toward me.

I walked back, and took it from his hand.

"I like your work, Baldwin."

I went into my office, sat down at my desk, wiped the sweat from my face. I breathed then, and it came out shaky and unsteady. It seemed like the first time in five minutes.

I wrote the check to the Acme Decorating Company. My hand shook when I wrote "\$1,875.50." Then I saw the slip of paper on my desk. It was one of the small scraps of paper on which Holder wrote the items to be entered in the thin ledger. This one read: "Income—TFG—\$1,100." I realized Holder must have dropped it there a few minutes before. I remembered the guy I'd met in the bar—Tedford F. Garland. TFG. I jumped up and went into the bar. It was empty except for the bartenders.

I ran out into the parking area behind the club, and a Buick was just pulling away. I jumped in my car and went after it.

TWO hours later, I had the answers to a few of my questions. Mr. TFG operated a handbook. Simple. Sure. And profitable. And he worked for Mr. Jake Holder. As did twenty other operators.

Well, look, I'm no reformer. I've placed a bet a time or two. Not often, because on fifty bucks a week there wasn't much left over for that kind of thing. But now I was pretty close to it. Almost in the business, you might say.

I went back to the Menagerie Club, and into my office. The check I'd made out to the Acme Decorating Company

was gone. It was in the mail, I knew. Jake Holder had taken it from my desk, and put it there, fast.

I sat down, lit a cigarette, sprayed the ashes around on the soft green rug trying to be calm. I thought it over. I wasn't *almost* in the business. I was in it. Period.

I'd helped transport cash profits of the enterprise to the bank, and was properly identified on the register. I'd written a check on the firm to pay a bill made out to me. I'd met a couple of Jake Holder's operators. I was sewed up nice and neat.

I think I began getting an inkling then that this thing might lead to murder. But the picture wasn't complete yet. It was quite awhile before it was complete.

Just for laughs, the next day I cornered Jake Holder.

I said: "I'd like to get in touch with the guy who kept your accounts before."

Holder gave me a long, calculating stare. "Why?" he asked.

"I've got a question I'd like to ask him about the 'Miscellaneous' account."

He said: "The man who was here before you didn't leave a forwarding address."

It was Holder who laughed. Not me.

Then he handed me a small scrap of paper. It said: "Expense—LLL—\$2,000." I took it into my office. I sat down behind my tear-drop desk. I unfolded the morning paper. And there I read, quite by accident, on the front page, a story concerning the district attorney. I hadn't even known his name before now. His name was Llewelyn L. Ledgerwood. LLL.

I was in even bigger business than I thought. I felt small blobs of sweat break out on my neck, soak into my collar.

Sewed up nice and neat.

Inevitably, this led back to Carol.

Things began straightening out for me. Some of the clouds I'd been up to my eyebrows in began clearing away. Carol, of course, had been way ahead of me. And that was why she'd said she would have to think over the matter of getting married. I wasn't a very good marriage risk. It might take more than five cents airmail to reach my forwarding address. Suddenly, I felt very cold sitting there in my green and chocolate office. The check for a hundred and twenty-five dollars Jake Holder had handed me for a week's work didn't burn my pocket any longer. It felt heavy and cold, like ice.

I got up and went into the bar and had a nice, warming drink. Then I went around to Carol's apartment, and told her my troubles. As if she didn't know. She knew, all right. She didn't know how bad they were, and she didn't know all the details. But she hadn't been up to her pretty green eyes in clouds. I think I said Carol had her feet on the ground.

Now, she said: "Can you take care of yourself, Bill?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you got a gun?"

I didn't have, of course.

But I got one. And Carol and I began going around to a shooting gallery, and I learned how to use it. Carol got pretty good, too. But somehow, it wasn't much fun.

We talked about it a lot. We got pretty objective about the whole thing. I couldn't resign because Jake Holder would see that I took a "trip"—with no forwarding address. Like the guy before me. I couldn't hop a plane to Seattle, or somewhere, because I couldn't stand leaving Carol. And I couldn't take her with me. Nobody could hide out with a girl like Carol. I didn't even bring that subject up.

One day, she said, hopefully, I thought: "Maybe somebody will kill him."

"They might."

"Whoever killed him would do the world a favor," she said slowly.

"Yes," I agreed. "They would."

But I knew there wasn't any hope of that, because he lived carefully. There wouldn't be much chance of anybody getting close enough to him for that. "The police wouldn't work too hard trying to solve Holder's murder, either," I added. "The district attorney, Mr. Llewelyn L. Ledgerwood, wouldn't be too anxious to drag his dirty wash out before the public."

These were just daydreams. About all we had left.

But pretty soon Carol's nerves began to fray. She began to change. I knew I had to do something. Then, too, there was the matter of an election, coming up in three months. Suppose the D. A. were defeated. The new one might get out his new broom, and do a little plain and fancy clean sweeping. I would make such a beautiful fall guy for Jake Holder.

I BEGAN seeing less of Carol than before. When I did see her, we had sudden, unaccountable clashes of temper.

I wore my gun all the time, now. She carried one, too, in her purse. As I circulated around the Menagerie Club, I noticed Jake Holder's black button eyes staring at me from time to time. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Now, the picture was almost complete.

When the turnover came, it was short and sweet.

He called me into his office.

He stood behind his big mahogany desk. "Sit down," he said. He motioned to the big leather chair.

I started to sit down, then I saw her. Carol. She stood over near the portable bar. My legs unbent suddenly, and I was standing up. I hadn't expected her.

"Our association," said Holder, "has been a pleasant one, Baldwin, and a profitable one, for both of us."

I felt the strength run out of my legs. I looked at him, then back at Carol. Her green eyes held mine steadily.

I heard his voice go on. "But all good things must come to an end."

The silence at the end of his sentence was heavy and lengthy.

I said: "So?"

"That's all, Baldwin. You're fired."

All at once, I felt light, a little giddy. I wanted to laugh. My mouth worked, but no words came out. Finally, I said: "That's almost too good to be true."

Holder laughed.

I looked at Carol. She had done it. She had found a way to do the thing I hadn't been able to do.

I turned to her. "Come on, Carol. Let's get out of here."

"Carol's staying," said Holder very quietly.

Then her voice came, a husky whisper, from her corner of the ring. "We were married this morning, Bill."

From then on, I don't remember much. Things were going around too fast.

But finally, I said: "I'd like to talk to Carol for a minute, alone."

He laughed again.

Carol came over from the portable bar, and touched his arm. "It's all right, honey. Just for a minute." She led him to the door. He went out, she closed the door after him.

She turned around slowly, facing me. Her green eyes had ice in them; there was something frozen in her face, too. It wasn't beautiful any more.

And when she spoke, her voice was the cold north wind. She said, simply: "Shove off, Bill."

There was no mistaking her meaning. No mistaking it at all. She hadn't done this for me. I'd had a crazy moment, thinking maybe she'd been noble for me.

But I was wrong.

I don't remember walking out. But I must have, because I caught that plane to Seattle. All the way, riding in the big plane, feeling the air currents under it like a big hand patting its belly, I thought about what had happened. It took awhile to realize how far behind those two I'd been. Holder had played me for a four-way sucker, because he wanted my girl. He figured the only way to get next to her was through me. But then somewhere along the line, I'd begun working for Carol, because it became a sucker play with a two-way stretch. I didn't like it when I thought of the service I'd rendered her. It sounded too much like pimp.

I guess I was way out of my league—with both of them.

Now I'm sitting here in this two-by-four hotel room in Seattle, and I'm still thinking about it. I keep remembering how good Carol got with a gun, how she said whoever killed Jake Holder would be doing the world a favor. How I'd pointed out the police wouldn't work too hard to solve it. I keep thinking there is one person in the whole world who can get close enough to him to do the job—and that's her. I keep remembering that two hundred grand in cash he's got—and more. I keep remembering the cold fire in Carol's eyes. There's only one thing that makes that—the reflection of a lot of money.

I guess I ought to call Jake Holder on the telephone and tell him to watch his step. Only, it's probably too late for that. From the beginning I've been way behind those two. They're out of my league. If I told Holder that death with blonde hair and green eyes was very close to him, he wouldn't believe me. And Carol can't be stopped from doing what she's got her mind made up to do. They're both way out of my league. I guess I'll leave it that way.

**BURY
ME
LAST**

It was such a dull funeral,
even the grave yawned—till
the planting party threatened
to turn wholesale.

*The man said: "Make the
motions tenderly, Mister."*



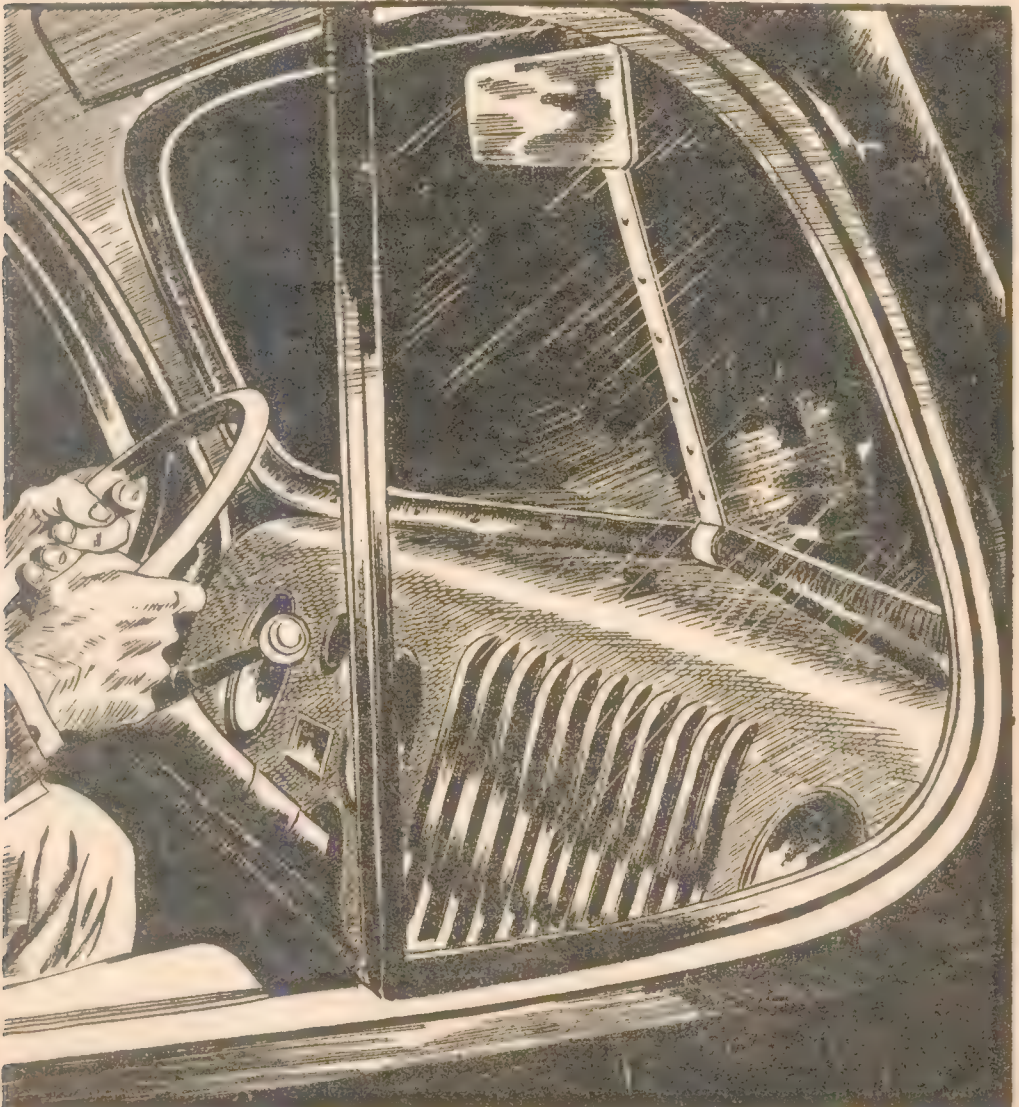
By W. LEE HERRINGTON

THE QUICK quiver of tension grabbed at my insides, the way it always does when the waiting is over. I sat on the edge of my chair in the lobby of the Pilgrim Hotel and watched the taxicab stop at the curb. The man who got out was big, beefy, and handled his own baggage.

He fumbled the heavy gladstone bag to the sidewalk, paid off the cab driver and loped toward the hotel door. That

was when the sedan with the District Attorney, Jerry Frontenac, and Police Chief Lynch in it, stopped across the street and waited. As long as they stayed out of it, it would be simple.

Sam Kincheloe, the pawnshop dick, sat very still behind one of the potted palms and kept his gloved hands folded in his lap. As the big man came through the door, Kincheloe swung his head around slowly and his eyes met mine.



His lips moved slowly without sound.
"Mal Portman."

I nodded. Mal Portman moved across the lobby with the deceptive grace of a big man, his right shoulder sagging a little lower than his left. When the bellhop was on him, reaching for the bag, a sneering laugh crossed Mal Portman's tight face. The hop's hand touched the bag. Portman's hand slackened its burden. The heavy gladstone slammed down across the boy's feet, pinning him to the floor for the seconds it took him to regain his balance.

Mal Portman had paused. What words passed between him and the hop didn't carry across to me. It didn't matter. A little incident with a hop in the lobby wasn't what I was there for.

Portman went to the desk. Again, like a poorly rehearsed play, or a missed cue, the continuity of a man getting his key didn't quite come off. Mal Portman waved his hands. He pounded the desk with a ham-like fist.

The clerk shrugged delicately, reached behind him for a key paddle. Portman yanked the key from the clerk with one savage lunge and walked quickly toward the elevator.

Sam Kincheloe looked to me for his cue. We went over to the elevator. It came down again. A tall girl in a red hat and her early thirties punched her cigarette out in the sand jar and got in the elevator.

The elevator went up and came down again and the bellhop walked toward the front door. We got in the elevator.

Sam Kincheloe said: "Seven."

The operator held the door open as Maness, the house dick, waddled across the lobby. Kincheloe grunted: "Does that lout have to be in on this?"

I shook my head. Maness got in the elevator and held a hand over the elevator driver's gloved fist.

Maness said: "What the hell goes with

you guys? You trying to give the house a bad name? I see Jerry Frontenac and the chief across the street. You need any more help or do you want me to play it dumb?"

"What you don't have to know won't have to hurt you," I said. "This joint going class . . . Having a dick on days as well as nights now?"

"Nah," Maness picked a fleck of cigar wrapper from his tongue and looked at it. "I had to come down early. Girl in 719 claims she lost a music box."

"One of those belly organs?" Kincheloe laughed. Maness laughed.

"Nah," Maness said. "One of those little tinkly things. Wanted me to handle it instead of the cops. We don't like notoriety."

I looked at the elevator operator. "Seven," I said suggestively. Maness nodded as if he understood. It was all right if he did or didn't, as long as Chief Lynch and the D.A. kept out of it the first few minutes.

SAM KINCHELOE dropped behind at the elevator to light a cigarette and I went on down the hall and knocked on the door of Room 717. The door wasn't locked. It swung open when my knuckles beat on it.

Mal Portman's back was to me. He raised the window blind, looked over his shoulder and when the look of what shouldn't have been surprise went away, he turned and came to the door. I whistled softly. The room lights showed up something the lobby lights hadn't.

Mal Portman's face had the look of a badly whipped fighter. One eye was almost shut, the other eye had a cut under it and on the opposite cheek bone, a bright mark, the size of a finger looked as if it had been scraped on, or off, by a nutmeg grater.

Portman wiped a thin smear of blood from his puffy lips and the hideous grin

I had seen downstairs came to his face.

He said: "Pretty, ain't I, Barney?"

I didn't think he would ever be pretty. "You ready to go down to the district attorney's office now and make your statement?" I asked.

"I didn't lie to you, Barney," Portman said. "I was coming back like I promised. I got beat up." It was one of those self evident statements.

"You explained that part over the phone," I said. "You ready, now?"

"You couldn't see your way clear to give me another hour . . . Maybe two hours?"

"With half of Midwest City looking on?" I retorted. "Let's go, Mal."

Mal Portman looked around the room. I followed his weary eyes. His gladstone lay on the bed, open, partly unpacked. His hot eyes rode around the baseboard and back up to mine. "I'd like to get cleaned up a little, Barney."

The nervous edge began crawling up my insides again. I was getting touchy. "Let's go!" I snapped. Mal Portman's eyes darted past my shoulder, back to me and his hand moved, a flash of smooth, bird-like shadow.

The Luger came into his hand, resting there easily, lined up about the level of my collar bone, maybe a little to one side. He just had time to lick the thin thread of blood off his lip with a dart of his tongue and open his eyes wide, clamp his wide mouth tightly shut before I felt the soft brush of the slug push at the fabric of my coat. It moved gently, like the fingers of a timid child.

All this, and death too—before the sound of Sam Kincheloe's Police .38 rocked its echoes back and forth in the dim hallway—before I saw the slug tear into Mal Portman. It hit his neck and his mouth slacked in surprise. A serene look of contentment flicked on in his eyes. He wore the look of a man who has found peace.

Mal Portman made a noisy exit. The Luger blasted a couple of times from his reflexes, the slugs tearing into the door facing. When he went down, he fell heavily, like any big man falls and the floor shook a little. Across the room, a window pane vibrated faintly from the noise.

Sam Kincheloe pushed me aside and knelt by the body of Mal Portman, safe-cracker and now corpse. When he looked up finally, his face was as white as mine must have been.

"I took one hell of a chance, Barney," he said. "God, what a chance . . . Shooting between your arm and your body. It had to be that way or not at all . . . He had you in the middle."

I nodded numbly and rubbed a sweaty hand over the fabric of my coat where the slug had ironed across it. Just the thickness of the coat, the shirt and an undershirt away from my ribs.

"Thanks, Sam," I said. I tried keeping it as simple as possible. "What got into the dumb bunny? It didn't call for gun-play," I added bitterly. "Well, Sam, I guess I owe you something. A drink . . . My life . . ."

And then the shaking got going in my insides again and I moved over to the wall phone and took down the receiver. The motion was part automatic, part manual. Do something. Call the cops. Do anything, my insides screamed at me. Vomit—or something.

I said into the phone: "Will you please report a shooting in Room 717? Yes, to the police, of course."

The reaction set in as I hung up. The backwash of shivering set in and I laughed. Sam Kincheloe put a hand on my arm.

"Don't blow your damn top just because you almost got it shot off," he said. "You're too trusting, Barney. You're a chump for a sucker bet or a sob story. Walk into boys like this with your gun

loose, and keep your hands out of your pockets. Well—what the hell, it came out all right, didn't it?"

Kincheloe calmed me like a veteran catcher cooling down a rookie pitcher with the count three and nothing. I said: "Take it easy, Sam, I'm all right now. I'm back on the beam."

Kincheloe put his gun away and closed the door. "There will be formal statements to make on this."

I nodded. "Too bad I couldn't have taken him back down to the office. He wanted to talk."

"Which is probably what got him the beating," Kincheloe said. I looked at Mal Portman's face. The marks of the beating stood out more clearly now that he was dead. "Next time, Barney, play it smart."

"We all have our off-days," I said.

JERRY FRONTENAC, the district attorney, sat at one side of Chief Lynch's desk. Lynch sat across from him. I hitched a chair closer to the end of the desk. Sam Kincheloe sat across from me.

Chief Lynch said: "Now boys, I've got to make a statement to the press in a few minutes. Anything about the story you want to change before we let it go out?"

I looked at Frontenac. Jerry Frontenac's eyes were half lidded and veiled as he stared back, unblinkingly at me. "Just tell it your own way, Barney. We already have Sam's interpretation of the incident."

"Then you probably have it right," I said. "Sam went along with me to pick up Mal Portman over at the Pilgrim Hotel. Portman drew his gun. I was caught with my pants down. Sam beat Portman to the shot. I wasn't expecting any trouble because Portman had talked to me earlier and we had gone over the thing this morning."

"That's what makes the thing sour," Frontenac said acidly. "You see the spot you have us in?"

"No," I said angrily. "I don't see any spot. I got a telephone call this morning at ten minutes to nine. A woman, who wouldn't give her name, asked me if I would go to Sixth and Oak streets and meet a man who could give me some valuable information."

"So you went."

"Naturally I went. When I got there, Portman came over to the car, got in and asked me to drive around. He was nervous and jumpy and pretty soon, he asked me to drive him over to the office. He asked me just where he would stand if he told us about his latest crime, surrendered the loot, confessed and took his punishment and got straight with society and us."

"Ya-a-a-h." Chief Lynch snorted. "Portman was in a spot and he wanted the sanctuary of your office for a few hours. That, or he wanted to stool for immunity. Wasn't that the way it was?"

The room was silent while I got up and went to the water cooler and stepped on the little foot switch. I swallowed the cold water, came back to the desk. Easy, Moffatt, I told myself . . . Lynch is digging a hole for you. You're a patient man, Barney Moffatt . . . Easy . . .

I said: "You want my story or do you want me to make a statement and sign it?"

"To hell with the fine print," Lynch snapped. "Just keep to the known facts. You get yourself in a spot where one of my men has to shoot a man to death to get you out of it. Quit holding out on us."

"I've never kicked a man down when he wanted to get up," I sneered. "Portman said he wanted things clean with the law so he could start over. He asked me for a couple of hours to clean up his personal business before he formally sur-

rendered. He told me he could give me the inside story on the Gillson robbery."

"You see what I mean, Jerry?" Lynch pounded the desk top with his hand.

"That's the spot, Barney," Frontenac said. "There wasn't any Gillson robbery. Portman was giving you a song and dance. Maybe Lynch is right. Portman was scared, came to you for protection. You turned him loose. Someone catches up with him, beats the hell out of him." The needle was going in deeper, now. "A smarter man would have held Portman on open arrest and tried to find out the answers."

Chief Lynch got up and stood over me. "Quit holding out."

I looked at Frontenac. The D.A. said: "You got us into this, Barney. Get yourself out. I won't cover for you if you won't tell the truth." That was Jerry Frontenac, all right. Stand right behind you. Way—way back behind you.

"Give it to the papers this way," I said. "An investigator for the district attorney's office, accompanied by a member of the police department went to arrest Portman and he resisted arrest."

"That isn't enough, Barney." Frontenac got up, his face white and strained. "What are the papers going to say when we tell them we don't have any idea what Portman was going to talk about? They're going to want to know who beat him. They'll bring us all into it."

Chief of Police Lynch pounded his desk with the flat of his hand. "Quit holding out on us!"

I got up and stung my hand as I slapped the oak desk top. "Quit pounding your desk. I can pound it as hard as you can. You guys want a story. I gave you that. You can take it that way or go over to the morgue and ask Mal Portman personally what he had in mind. I said the guy wanted to go straight."

I forgot all about Sam Kincheloe's

good advice about being smart. I was sore as hell. I took the little card out of my billfold that accredited me to Frontenac's office and the plated badge. The badge seemed to have a tinny sound as I threw it on the desk.

"All right, Jerry, there it is. A guy wants to go straight and he picks me for the preacher . . . I won't let him down. To hell with you guys."

Frontenac's face got red. "Take it easy, Barney."

Sam Kincheloe got up and came around and put a hand on my arm. "The chief just wants the facts, Barney." Sam Kincheloe snapped the little buttons shut on his black gloves.

I slapped his hand off my arm. "You gun crazy guy," I snarled. Sam Kincheloe shrugged and looked at the chief. I softened. That wasn't the way to handle Sam Kincheloe. I owed him something for putting the slug in the slot for me back there at the Pilgrim Hotel. I said: "I'm sorry, Sam. But don't start crowding me."

Kincheloe put on his hat. "I know how you feel about it, Barney," he said and snapped his glove buttons again and went out. Frontenac picked up my credentials and put them in his pocket.

It seemed that I should have had a lump in my throat watching the plated badge disappear . . . The three years, four months and five days I had been a staff member washed away along with it. I didn't. If there was a lump in my throat it was the hard, cold, choking lump of rage.

Lynch went over to a cabinet and got a bottle of bonded bourbon and some Dixie cups. He poured the drinks. Two of them one for him, one for the D.A.

He said: "Having wisely resigned your commission as an investigator for the D.A.—" Lynch warmed the cold in his voice with his drink. He smacked his lips. "—you are now a private citizen.

Your natural anger will lead you to feel impelled to inquire further into the affairs of this fellow Portman. Just one word . . . *DON'T!*"

Frontenac put his drink down the hatch. He fiddled with his black Hom-burg. "Hold yourself in readiness to appear before the Grand Jury at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, Moffatt."

Lynch said: "And turn in your gun. You are not empowered to carry firearms. In ten minutes, you will be on the teletype to all enforcement departments. Make one overt act, and I'll pick you up and toss you in the can."

"I'll worry about the gun," I said. "A guy got shot to death a little while ago because I was too slow with it."

"One overt act . . ." Lynch said again.

"I'll remember," I promised. "And when the time comes, Lynch, don't send any of the boys. Come and get it yourself. There's enough glory to pass it around."

Nobody stopped me, either then or when I went out the front door of headquarters. I was grateful for that. I wanted to live a long time. I didn't want to go out, hot-headed, shot to death in the street by a cop. But either way, I wanted to live long enough to let them bury me last.

And because how long I lived didn't worry me, I went back to the Pilgrim Hotel. Bad news travels fast, but not that fast. Maness, the house dick didn't ask a lot of questions when I got the key for 717 from him.

CHAPTER TWO

All Through Wandering

MANESS stood just inside the door and ran a dirty finger around the hole where Mal Portman's slugs had ripped the wood.

"How's things?" he asked.

"So-so," I lied. "How's with you?"

"Oh, as the man said when he broke his leg . . . I can't kick." Maness chuckled. "Pretty good, hunh?"

I told him it was funny as hell and asked him where I could find the hop who had carried Portman's bag into the room.

"I talked to him," Maness said. "He doesn't know anything."

"What would there be for him to know?" I snapped.

"You're sure as hell touchy all of a sudden," Maness frowned. "I just said I talked to him. He's a kid named Maxie Steck. He said Portman came into the room, let the kid open his bag . . . We ain't got no valets you know—and got his Luger out of the bag and the kid left. That is, he called the kid back, gave him a fin and asked him to get him a fifth of rye."

I agreed with him that it was standard practice. There was nothing in the room the cops hadn't seen. There wasn't anything to look for. It had been a simple killing. I was just the old she-cat coming back for the last kitten that wasn't there. The carpet was gone and the floor had a clean circle where it had been scrubbed.

The window was open and some of the smells from the exhaust fan on the hamburger joint down seven floors and across the alley rode up on the air and the fried onion part had a clean smell, for a while.

Maness went on down the hall to help the carpenter carry the tools he'd need to repair the holes in the door facing. The room was quiet.

Quiet enough to hear the faint sobbing sound. I went to the wall, put my ear to it. The sounds were diffused and deadened like a poorly tuned radio. But clear enough to make out the sound of a woman, crying softly. As though she was afraid of disturbing someone else. That, and a record player, somewhere, playing an old Gene Austin tune.

It was none of my business. It hadn't been any of my business either, when Mal Portman had wanted to go straight. It wasn't impulse. Some of the cold rage and hot resentment that filtered through me had taken something with it and I felt lonely too.

Not lonely enough to cry. Just enough to be bothered by someone else crying and the torch music across the hall. When I knocked on the door of Room 719, the sobbing slowed, then stopped and a chain rattled and fell away from the slot with a dull, metallic thump.

She was about thirty. I remembered her then—the girl in the red hat, getting in the elevator while Kincheloe waited for the hop to come back down. Her hair was a little stringy and her eyes were red-rimmed and swollen. She just stood there like a hurt child, the hurt welling up in her eyes as she listened to the music across the hall. Whoever it was liked the torchy part. It came again: *Don't you cry for me, anymore, tonight . . . I'm coming home . . .*

I said: "Whatever it is, it *can* be helped."

Don't you wait up for me, by the candle-light . . . I'm coming home . . . I'm coming home . . .

I softly cursed the sentimentalist across the hall. The woman shook her head.

"Not this time," she said bitterly.

I looked past her shoulder, around the room. The dresser with its cheap mirror and the odds and ends and the things that make a dresser a woman's dresser. The picture. I wanted to get out of there fast. Somewhere else. Anywhere else. Mostly, I wanted to forget the hurt, wet look in her tortured eyes and too, the music across the hall.

I'm all through wandering . . . I'm weary . . .

The door closed behind me and I went over and looked at Mal Portman's eight

by ten, hand-tinted portrait. None of the marks on his face were there. Just a friendly sort of look on the face and in the corner, the simple inscription: "To Zelma, with Love."

I TOOK off my hat. Zelma didn't seem to mind one way or the other if I stayed or went, so I went to the door and put my hat back on.

I said: "I didn't know about Mal and you."

"You'd have read it in the papers. The reporters took a picture of me, too. Mr. Maness was nice about it and tried to have them keep me out of it, but you know how newspaper photographers are."

I nodded. I knew a lot of pic men. I said: "I'm the fellow Portman had his gun on, when he was killed."

"Yes, I know," she said. "I've seen your picture in the papers along with Mr. Frontenac. Do you hound many men to their deaths?"

"Not many. Mal Portman didn't have to die. He told me he wanted to get going straight. Does that make sense?"

"Yes." Some of the tears were drying now, leaving little stains on her cheeks. "Yes, that makes sense."

"I promised to let him go about his business for a couple of hours. He was to surrender to my office. Instead, he went out, got himself beat up. He called me on the phone about that, and asked me to meet him at the Pilgrim Hotel, here next door to your room. So I came for him."

"Then it wasn't your men? You didn't give him the beating—those terrible marks on his face?"

"You saw that? No, it wasn't my men, nor me. Someone didn't want Portman to surrender. Don't you see? The whole thing is senseless. Portman didn't have to die. I wasn't even going for my gun . . . I expected him to come

with me peacefully." I shook my head. "I'd have bet my life—maybe I did—that Portman wanted to go straight."

"He did." Her words were cold and bitter. "I am the woman who called you. Mal wanted to make so awfully sure that he could have a couple of hours. I was waiting for him. He was coming back to marry me."

She stood away from me and scoffed at the hard look of surprise on my face. She held back the tears and waited. It would be a long, long wait. I had no answer for her.

"That was why he was going straight. That was why I was waiting. I'd always have waited." Her words had a hard, miserable, choking sound. Bitter and hopeless. "Please go away, Mr. Moffatt."

I kept my hand on the door knob.

She said: "You can laugh, if you like. It is really very funny. Isn't it funny, Mr. Moffatt?" She laughed a dry little laugh. Sure, it was funny. Funny as hell or an open grave or a slug in your belly.

"I didn't know," was the best I could do.

"Mal Portman knew. I knew. Take another good look at me Mr. Moffatt. I'm thirty-two years old. You can't be too particular when you're thirty-two, can you?"

Was there any answer to that? I didn't know. I remembered Frontenac and his redhaired wife and wondered how much she cried for him and when I looked at Zelma again, the tears were gone. Just her cold, tired and weary voice again, asking me to go.

I shook my head and went to the wall phone and called a number I seldom used. It got me two reservations at an uptown restaurant.

"I'm pretty particular," I said. "First, we'll have dinner. We'll talk if you want to, or just sit, or whatever you like. We'll go over to the fights, afterward at Convention Hall, or if you want to,

we'll just get quietly drunk. None of it will help, but it'll get you over the hump—the first few bad hours."

She bit her lip and the sobbing started again. I shook her shoulders gently and when that did no good, I let her cry out the long consuming sobs against my shoulder. Long before she had finished I knew the Portman case hadn't snapped shut up there in the chief's office, or ended next door in a four buck a day hotel room with bath—and death thrown in.

I cursed under my breath as the drunk across the hall started the Gene Austin record again and wondered if she was old enough to remember the words.

I WENT downstairs and caught up with the desk clerk as he was going off duty. He was strictly not the Hollywood type hotel clerk. He didn't mince. He didn't prance. He stood in the middle of the washroom, sighted in to the mirror and admired the fit of his maroon sports shirt as he closed the mother-of-pearl buttons down the front.

I said: "Mal Portman lived here quite a while."

"Too long." He folded the collar down exactly as he wanted it. Some of the dark hair on his chest showed above the top of the opening of the maroon shirt. "He was a nasty sort of Joe."

"Oh, I don't know." I tried to be friendly. "Take a shot at you, maybe. Nothing more than that. All in a day, for a boy like Portman."

"Boy?" He patted the collar again and put on his sports coat. "Old as you are. Thirty-five, if he was a day."

"Thirty-six," I corrected him. "He seemed to be having a little trouble getting his key."

"Why wouldn't he have trouble? Look, he came down, earlier in the day with some guy and paid his bill and checked out. He comes back about

three-thirty, looking like he has been thrown out of some chippy joint. He wanted his key. I asked him to register. That was all the trouble there was, friend." The clerk buttoned his coat. "I was more or less polite about it, you understand."

"I could see that," I said.

The clerk put his face close to mine. His breath was flavored with spearmint. His face was the kind you would expect to see looking at you from the other side of the windshield of a Mack Bulldog truck.

"He asked for his key," he said beligerently. "I told him he would have to register again. He said to hell with that and did I want him to get tough—so I gave him the key. He had lived here for about a year or so and I didn't want to be too damn snotty about it. So I handed him the key and took his card out of the dead file and put it back in Occupied. When you and this other John killed him, I put his card back in the dead file. That answer all your questions, friend?"

I thanked him for bothering him.

He said: "You don't bother me one damn bit."

"The kid that handled his bag . . . Maxie Steck. Where do I find him?"

"Maxie went off duty at six o'clock."

I thanked him again and we went to the lobby.

Halfway across the lobby, he said: "He's got a room here. 1912."

I nodded and started toward the elevator. The clerk said: "That would be on the nineteenth floor." A ghostly smile crossed his face as I punched the UP button. What the hell, I thought. Let him have the punch line. Maybe his feet hurt. Or his stomach. My own stomach reminded me I hadn't eaten lunch and I hoped Zelma wouldn't mind too much if I talked to the bellhop before I took her to dinner.

Maxie Steck opened the door a crack and eyed me carefully. He had a half-scared, half-looped look on his face and his muddy little eyes tripped across me and the scared look went away. He motioned me into the room with a wag of his bullet-shaped head.

Maness, the house dick, tossed a frown in my direction and threw his poker hand on the top of the discard. The Negro porter with the frayed red jacket put a big paw over the money and held the fifth of rye behind him. Maxie Steck said: "Relax."

I took Maxie's arm and we went down the hall and stood under the red fire-exit light. I said: "I saw the little by-play in the lobby."

Maxie Steck was about twenty, or twenty-two. The half tight look on his face was neither liquor or dope, just experience. The muddy look in his eyes would always be there.

"Somebody complain, or something?"

"Not up to now," I said. "Portman is dead, his girl friend is crying her heart out and you and Maness and the porter are drinking his liquor. Why should anyone complain?"

Maxie rubbed the palms of his hands together. It made a dry sound. The only sound in the dim hallway. No sweaty palms, no nervousness. Just a hop playing poker with the staff on his night off and the staff helping him drink the dead man's liquor.

"What can you tell me about Mal Portman?"

"If there's anything I know better than anything else, it's to keep my nose clean. I hear a lot about Mr. Portman. I hear he has cracked a few safes in his time. He doesn't do any of his heisting here at the Pilgrim Hotel, so as far as I'm concerned, here at the Pilgrim he's a right guy. Away from here, I wouldn't be the one to know."

"Now, about the girl in 719."

MAXIE hesitated. "Whatever goes with Mr. Portman and Miss Daley is none of my business. So far as I know, they kept it clean. Suppose you chin awhile?"

"When Portman slammed the bag down on you, you didn't seem to care much for that sort of treatment."

"The poor old guy is dead," Maxie said. "He comes in and whams his keister on my dogs. Think nothing of it. He is dead. Leave us not rake over his bones."

Maxie started to walk away from the red light.

"Kincheloe talk to you yet?" I just threw it in for effect. Maxie stopped walking. "He will," I said. "The district attorney is going to fan me in front of the Grand Jury in the morning. I think he is afraid the coroner's inquest might turn up something he can't and he's sore."

"You in a jam with your boss over this?"

"Up to my knees," I lied. There wasn't much use following through. It was the look on the kid's face that kept me going with the questions. "Who was with Portman when he checked out?"

"He called the guy Jennie, or something like that. They came in together, and this guy with him told me to come up and carry the bag down and when I went out with them to put it in the car, neither one of them did any talking. It was a green or a black Ford coach. Or maybe a four door sedan. I don't remember."

"Just the two of them."

"Yeah, then when Mr. Portman came back later, he drops the gladstone on my dogs and says: 'Well, you carried it down for the cops, now you can carry it back for me', then he got his key and we came up to 717."

"Nothing unusual on the trip up. The room vacant?"

"You kidding? The room had been

serviced and was vacant. Nobody home. He told me to open his bag. He came over to the bed, got this German pistol out of the bag and put it under his belt, in front. He says: 'Maxie, don't ever trust no cops,' and asks me to get him a fifth of rye and to please not poison it on the way back."

"And that was the end of it."

"Oh, no, it wasn't. Keep this under your skull though because I quit splitting the bigger tips with Maness a while back. Mr. Portman let me get almost to the elevator, then he called me back. He says he is sorry about slamming me around with the bag and I tell him it's O.K., a guy gets sore once in a while."

"He gets a couple of bills out of his pocket, puts them in my shirt pocket and pats my shoulder and says I'm a good kid and does that make things right. I told him it fixed things up very nicely. Very nicely."

"And you got the fifth at the liquor store."

"Yeah. When I got back, the shooting and the tumult had died, so to speak. Sorry to see the old guy go. Maness says he took a beating. Too bad. You want to come in for a drink?"

I thanked Maxie and when we got to the door, Maness opened it. He said: "You forgot to mention that Frontenac had tossed you out over to the court house."

"A little thing like that," I said. I turned down Maxie's offer of the drink and went back down to the seventh floor.

Zelma Daley had done an excellent job with the cosmetics. That was as far as she could go. They don't make anything to hide the look in her eyes.

"I'm the old nosy boy who used to work for the D.A." I said. "You think you could be hungry?"

She took my arm and we went down the hall.

CHAPTER THREE

A Lead to Murder

ZELMA DALEY waited in the frowsy corridor of Convention Hall while I went into the wash-room with Maness, the house dick, and Sam Kincheloe. Maness unwrapped a half pint of blend and opened it. I helped them kill it and listened to Kincheloe.

He said: "Maness tells me you were nosing around the Pilgrim, talking to the help."

"Is that bad?"

"No. . . I was just making a comment. Chief Lynch still thinks you're holding out all the way down the line. He's just waiting for you to fall on your face. Now, we see you out with Mal Portman's girl friend and it gives a guy to wonder. It suggests angles."

"Lynch told me I was a private citizen," I flared. "That means I can follow any lead that starts with me or comes back to me. Mal Portman wanted to go straight. It got him killed."

"Hell," Kincheloe complained. "We know about that. But you'd better keep a close eye on the moll, though. She was Portman's woman. No use getting yourself in any deeper with the chief."

"How deep can you get?" I had to say something to keep from punching Sam Kincheloe in the puss. "Tell the chief I'm running my affairs. He can run his. I've got some rights. Stick his nose into my personal affairs and I'll come for him."

Maness, the house dick, laughed. Kincheloe laughed. "O.K.," he chuckled, "I'll tell him. You want to get a little money down on Kid Kibicki, in the final?"

I cooled a little. I told Sam I didn't see anything on the card to bet on and we broke it up and I went back and piloted Zelma Daley to our seats.

I pointed out the big shots to her. The mayor, the chief of police, the district attorney and his redhaired wife. The tall, good looking louse with the D.A., and his wife was a fellow named Lou Gillson, of the Gillson Company. Frontenac was in deep conversation with Chief Lynch, and Gillson was giving his attention to Stella Frontenac, the red-head. They were all very happy.

Sam Kincheloe went over to where they were sitting. Stella Frontenac waved at me from across the arena. I waved back.

Zelma Daley said: "She is a beautiful woman."

"A beautiful tramp," I corrected her. "She and Gillson, the good looking man, have been carrying on under Frontenac's nose for about a year. It will boil over one of these days."

As the house lights went down, Sam Kincheloe got up and went out. Lou Gillson got up and followed Kincheloe, and I tried explaining to Zelma Daley why the boys were fighting. It was easier than explaining baseball to a woman. She took the first bouts with a deadpan and I wondered if it had been a good idea bringing her to the fights to cheer her up.

By the time the main event was on, the place had the usual sounds and smells. Good cigars and bad ones. The same as the people. And the noise.

A wasp colored boy in green trunks climbed into the ring and took a lot of boos. Zelma got a half interested look on her pale face as the white boy, Kid Kibicki, came in. By the end of the fifth, the affair seemed to relax her, until Smoky Kinell, the wasp colored boy, came to his corner with a cut over his eye, the other almost closed.

Zelma Daley was white faced and nervous at this point.

Smoky Kinell was relaxed as the referee looked him over carefully. I half

turned in my seat and the hand touched my shoulder.

Maxie Steck threw a nervous, jumpy look over his shoulder, then his muddy eyes jerked back to mine. He said: "You like the Smoke?"

I looked up at the ring. The referee had made up his mind. The wasp colored boy was coming out for the sixth. I said: "He's got a lot left."

"Ten will get you twenty he can't last the ride."

"That's a chump bet," I said. "The ref has his eye on the boy already. It could end anytime."

"A chance we all have to take," Maxie grinned. I was beginning to like the muddy eyed hop. Almost enough to let him chump me into a bet.

"He's got half a chance," Maxie said. "That makes it a two to one deal. Ten will get you twenty." I nodded and let him see the corner of a ten. He pushed my hand away and leaned back.

Zelma Daley smiled at me. It was just a little smile and because I had a ten riding on the brown boy I gave him my attention.

If you could believe the sports radio announcer just in front of us, "Kid Kibicki was carrying the mail." You've heard him and his corny phrase over the air on Friday nights. I saw his lips move in his pet expression.

Maybe he was right. Kibicki punished the brown boy with lefts and rights and the boy in the green trunks gave ground freely. He was out-pointed in the first five rounds and now, in the sixth.

Maxie Steck leaned close enough to me to say: "Yessir, Barney, the Kid is really carrying the mail tonight."

The wasp colored boy backed farther away from our corner. Then they came back. With twenty-five seconds of the round remaining, the brown boy slashed and slugged into Kibicki's defenses and they came our way. The wasp colored

boy threw off his lethargy and his gloves slashed and flashed. A left, two rights and another left caught Kibicki.

A hard right under the heart lowered him and a left brought him up again. Then it happened. If the Kid 'was carrying the mail', it would be late tonight. He chucked it in the nearest sewer and lit out for home. The left stunned him. He went down slowly, like Mal Portman had gone down. Zelma Daley had a white, sick look on her face as we stood up. It had been a lousy idea, bringing her to this carnage to help her forget Portman.

They were still working over Kid Kibicki when we got to the end of the row of seats. The wasp colored boy looked down at The Kid, licked his purple lips and climbed through the ropes.

Maxie Steck met me at the end of the row of seats and made exaggerated brushing motions on my coat lapel, with his long fingers. He grinned at the girl.

"Nice boy you got here, Miss Daley. Knows how to pick 'em." Maxie tucked the two tens into my breast pocket and tamped them down.

"A chump bet," I reminded Maxie.

"Well," Maxie said, "that's the way we learn. Easy come, easy go. Here today, gone tomorrow. Be seeing you around, Barney." Maxie turned away from us and walked quickly up the aisle.

I took Zelma Daley's arm. Maybe I was getting off the chump list after all. The twenty would buy a lot of drinks. When I dropped her off at Room 719, at the Pilgrim, I knew a lot about Zelma Daley and Mal Portman. Too much. I went back to the little bar on the corner and got another drink of rye and brooded over it.

IT WASN'T one of those sordid things. It had a clean, fresh sound to it. Mal Portman had met her here in this joint where she had worked.

He had made a few incompleated passes at her. She didn't dramatize that part. Just that Portman had fallen for her, hard. She loved the guy. And then Portman had found out that he loved her. And how she had gone for a long walk and looked into her heart and her soul and ripped the bracelet from her arm that Portman had given her and thrown it from her, the tears scalding her eyes, because it was a stolen bracelet. And how she had told Portman and they had gone the next day to a little store down in the North End to buy her a real present. She told me about how Portman had never had a chance as a kid and how she had come from a little farm down around Joplin, Missouri, and how she had met Mal Portman.

Mostly, though, it was about the little music box and the little store in the North End. How Mal had picked out the little mahogany box that tinkled when you opened it and played some little tune she didn't know the name of and the clean laugh as Mal Portman had paid cold, honest dollars for it. And now Mal Portman was gone. The little music box was gone.

"Mal is gone," she had said softly. "Do a man's crimes die with him, Barney Moffatt?"

"They ought to," I had told her and only half believed it.

"Then can't we just give him a quiet funeral, like anyone else. Wanting to go straight. . . Didn't that earn him that much?"

I had flared a little at that. "The whole thing is screwy," I had said. "Something is missing from the screwy puzzle." I didn't re-hash how Mal Portman had his Luger lined up on me when Sam Kincheloe had given me a life by taking Portman's.

And she had said: "Goodnight, Barney," very softly and closed the door. If I could have had my way, it would

all be forgotten in seventy-two hours. A quiet little funeral. I'd promised her that much. I wondered if the boys who had pushed him around would be there at the funeral to look on the handicraft of their fists and have a look at the corpse.

I stared at my drink and wondered why they hadn't just slipped a couple of slugs into Portman and left him down there under the Waterworks Bridge where it had happened. Maybe the beating was to scare him out of town. A beating like that might have scared me out of town. Not Mal Portman. With a girl like Zelma Daley waiting for him? I wondered what I would have done and I knew I would have come back, crawling, if necessary.

Sam Kincheloe slapped me on the back and brought me out of the reverie. Maness, the house dick, sat on my right and Kincheloe on my left.

Sam said: "I understand you had a tenner on the brown boy."

"You don't miss much, do you Sam?"

"Not a hell of a lot. Remember what I told you this afternoon? Play it smart, I said?" Sam Kincheloe said: "You're getting smart. Smoky Kinell has won twenty-nine of his last thirty-two fights with KO's in the sixth."

I nodded wisely and offered to buy a drink. They both ordered rye and I looked at the small change in front of me and reached in the breast pocket of my coat for the dough Maxie Steck had dropped to me. I separated the two tens and put one on the bar. Then I stiffened.

A square of paper nestled in the fold of the second bill. I put it in a side pocket, paid for the drinks and went to the washroom.

The square of white paper was a standard, Midwest City pawn ticket. It attested that today, a Mr. John Smith, no address, had placed with the Consi-

dine Loan Company, one mahogany music box, the same to be collateral against the loan of one dollar, plus interest, payable every ninety days in advance. I put the thing in my billfold and went back to the bar.

As soon as it was decent for a guy buying a drink, I got away from Maness and Kincheloe and went to the Pilgrim's Hotel. I was spending enough time there now that it would have been a time saver to have just checked into a room.

The door of Room 1912 was slightly ajar. The smell of rye whisky was strong in the room. Maxie Steck was draped over the card table. Some of his blood had run as far as the scattered cards but no farther. There wasn't enough to run farther.

The hole in his temple still had little pieces of broken glass clinging to the hair and what was left of the larger chunks, including the neck of the broken bottle, lay on the floor.

Maxie Steck, the muddy eyed bellhop was dead. One dead end of a dead end fork in the wrong road.

"You little chump," I said fiercely. "Didn't you already have enough? You had the dead man's liquor and his twenty bucks and his girl's music box. Did you need the extra buck so awfully damn bad, Maxie?"

Talking to Maxie wouldn't do any good and the cold rage shut the words off in my throat. I closed the door and went downstairs. When I was up the street a couple of blocks, I went into a drugstore and phoned the cops and told them about Maxie and his problem.

They asked my name. "Smith," I said wearily, "John Smith."

LOU GILLSON opened the apartment door and hesitated. "It's late, Moffatt. . . Is it official?"

"I don't know," I said. "Why don't I come in and we'll find out?"

"Can't it wait until tomorrow—at my office?"

I told him it could wait but that I didn't think it should. "Tomorrow might be too late," I added.

He screwed a bitter look of disappointment on his face and let me in. I had a drink of his nice liquor and sat down. I was tired and weary. Gillson's eyes followed me around the room. His eyes stopped as my eyes stopped on the paleness of the bleached maple door. The bedroom door. I looked back at Gillson.

"It's about the robbery," I said.

"What robbery?"

I stood up. "All right, if you're going to be cagy about it, go ahead. Your safe was robbed three months ago."

"Was it?"

Gillson's eyes were icy blue and hard and cold. If he was thirty-five, the pouches under his eyes were fifty-five. He was dressed neatly and attractively and had money. Beyond that, he was a louse.

"Someone should really tell me these things." He tried a faint smile.

"I'm telling you now," I snapped. "It's none of my business if you play house with the district attorney's wife. I'm not after you on that. I'm after the story about a hell of an unlucky fellow who got shot to death over in the Pilgrim Hotel this afternoon."

"Oh," he said. "The Portman affair."

"The Portman who robbed your safe. This morning, he came to me and offered to throw himself on the mercy of the court—on the Gillson robbery."

"How much did he tell you?"

"Let's worry about what you're telling me. Portman offered to surrender, along with himself, the majority of the loot from the Gillson safe robbery. That was his exact statement. He didn't get a chance to come back and surrender. He was given a severe beating, maybe to

scare him out of town," I ran over it quickly for him.

"He might have run, but he had a girl waiting for him to come back to, so he came back."

Lou Gillson stood up. He perspired. He paced the floor. "Who did you hire to beat him up, Gillson?"

"Wait a minute, Moffatt," Gillson barked. "I don't play that way. I use money, not force."

I took another long drink from his bottle.

Gillson said: "Are you in need of money?"

"No," I said. "I'm solvent."

"Your loyalties are, I suppose, with Frontenac, the district attorney?"

I remembered Frontenac and the way he had stood behind me in Chief Lynch's office. I laughed.

"A man is entitled to whatever loyalty he can inspire," I said. "If he can't inspire it, he is entitled to whatever his money will buy."

"Five thousand?" Gillson was sweating now.

I shook my head. "No money. Just the answers." I knew then he was going to talk. It was just a matter of waiting, and where he would begin.

"You know about—Stella and me?" I nodded. Gillson said: "Stella and I love each other. We have kept it a secret."

"From whom?" I sneered.

"Jerry Frontenac is an unreasonable man. Three months ago, we were all at a party. Stella and I lost our heads. . . We came to my office. . . We embraced. . . You know how it is."

"I can guess," I said.

Lou Gillson's face reddened. "After we left the office, Stella discovered her charm bracelet was missing. I dropped her off at her apartment because it was getting late. I came back to the office, looked for the damn thing and found it,

with the clasp broken. I called her on the phone, told her I had found it and would bring it over. She warned me that Jerry was coming up the stairs. I told her I would put it in the safe, because, after all, it was a present from her husband and you just don't go around with things like that in your pocket."

"A man like you ought to be able to jockey a thing like that," I said. "Why all the horsing around?"

"Well," Gillson reddened again. "The bracelet is one of those charm things. Lots of little items that she had picked up here and there, a little locket, a trinket . . . mostly, though, we were afraid of the key angle."

"What key?" I was getting warm now.

"A tiny miniature of my apartment key. Stella had a jeweler make it for her. A tiny replica of my house key."

"What else was in the safe?" I had him on the run now.

"Just the envelope with the five thousand bucks."

Gillson made the words sound very vulgar.

"Mind if I whistle?" I asked. I had another drink. The bedroom door opened a quarter of an inch. Gillson made a futile, gasping sound as I went over and shoved on the door. Someone behind it shoved it back at me.

"O.K., Red," I said, "you can come out now."

Stella Frontenac came into the room regally. She tossed her red hair over her shoulder as if she liked the feel of it on her cool skin. Her low cut dress showed the quick rise and fall of her breathing. She looked at me defiantly. "Jerry sent you," she said.

"To hell with your husband," I said. "I'm playing this for Barney Moffatt. I guess Jerry doesn't tell you everything. I tossed in my little tin badge this afternoon."

"Well, Lou," Stella Frontenac said,

"I guess we're in a mess." She pushed her red hair back from her face. The bracelet dangling on her arm made a tinkling, metallic sound.

"Is that the thing?" I asked Gillson softly.

I got my hat and another free drink and went to the door. "One of us is a damn liar," I said. "If that was in the safe. . ."

GILLSON said: "Your man Portman must have sold it, not knowing its potential value. If he had realized how important it was, he might have used it for blackmail. I would have paid five thousand, gladly, to get back the bracelet."

"I get it now," I said. "Your office manager phoned the cops, then you. You realized that if you made mention of the five thousand and not the bracelet, the man who robbed the safe might take a good look at the bracelet, attach importance to the little miniature of the key, and start working back to you. So you told the cops it was all a horrible mistake."

"Yes," Gillson nodded his head, "that's the way it was. My office manager called me, I came at once, explained that I had removed the money the night before. That it was a false alarm. They were nice about it and forgot the whole thing."

"I guess I'll have to start somewhere else, myself, and work back to you," I said. I turned the door knob a little. Stella Frontenac was on me like a playful cat.

"You'll keep your mouth shut, Barney?"

"Both of you are lying," I sneered. "You say she lost the bracelet. She's wearing it now."

"I was coming to that," Gillson said quickly.

"You had Portman beat up," I said.

"You wanted him to tell you what he had done with the bracelet. He told you and you let him go. Who was the cop you had working for you?"

A puzzled look trickled into Lou Gillson's face. "So help me, Barney I don't know anything about his being beat up. Look. . . When the thing was robbed from my safe, I had to get it back. It wasn't worth much as jewelry, but it might bring a few dollars in a pawnshop. So I asked a few guarded questions, got hold of a fellow named Sam Kincheloe, who inspects the pawnshops. This afternoon, it turned up in an old gold buyer's shop, over on McGee Street. Kincheloe returned it to me."

"For how much?" I asked.

"There wasn't any money mentioned," Gillson said. "Apparently, it had been sold as old gold."

I didn't tell them how Zelma Daley had accepted the bracelet and how she had thrown it as far from her as she could when Portman had confessed to her that it had been stolen. It was getting clear now. Someone had found it. The finder had needed money. He had sold it for its gold content to an old gold buyer. And Sam Kincheloe, the pawnshop dick had been on the lookout for it and now it was back on Stella Frontenac's pale-skinned arm.

And that was the end of the Gillson robbery case and the end of the Portman story.

Stella said: "You'll keep your mouth shut, Barney?"

"Get away from me," I snarled. "I don't give a damn what you do or where you go."

Lou Gillson said: "I wouldn't claim the money, if it turned up—unless I had to. . . Unless you brought us into it, I mean."

I nodded as if I understood and went out of the apartment and down to the street.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Set to Music

PASSANTINO'S Funeral Parlors were still open, with the lights on. So it was only a little after midnight when I had their assurance that they would requisition Mal Portman's body—when everybody else was through with it. It was O.K. to do a better job for me than they would have done for the county fee.

It was because of that and the shape of my thoughts that I didn't see the guy with the scrubby beard until I got in my car. He held the short barrelled .38 in his lap with its noise end in my direction.

"Drive up the street a couple of blocks and turn into an alley and stop."

I obeyed orders. When I stopped, the short man said: "Make the motions very tenderly, mister . . . Shell it out slowly . . . Slowly. . ."

I put the billfold on the seat and my money. He looked everything over, cursed me and jammed the gun hard in my ribs. "Everything?"

The lad was thorough. When he had everything he wanted, he got out, raised the hood of the old car and jerked loose the plug wires and the coil wire. He backed down the alley as I got out of the car and hugged the brick wall. He tossed a shot at me and I heard it scrape along the bricks and whine on across the street. I ducked. The man turned and ran up the alley to the street and turned right.

I reached inside the car, lowered the sun visor and let the little .32 Auto drop into my hand. I was tired of being the patient man. I liked the feel of the crawling of my insides. I had finished the job several times tonight. At the hotel. At Gillson's and at Passantino's Funeral Parlors. The sheer excitement of the

little hard knots in my belly pushed me down the alley.

I lost my man twice, found him again and ten blocks later, I stalked him down a dark alley. He knocked on a door. A dim light came on in the rear of a building. The man went in. I moved down the alley cautiously, my coat sleeve scraping along the brick walls.

It wasn't a long wait. Eight—ten minutes at the most. He came back up the alley, the wrapped package under his arm. I crouched behind the smelly garbage pail of a cheap restaurant and waited.

I could hear his sigh of relief as he passed the spot where I crouched. I let him get ten feet past me.

"Jennie?" I whispered. He stopped, whirled, and I could see his dim outline in the alley. "Jennie?" I whispered again. It was the only name left on the roster of men who had come in touch with Mal Portman.

His gun, or mine, blasted along the darkness. He had good ears. The shot chipped mortar and the slug whispered to me of death as it went on past.

A good man with an automatic, an expert, could have taken him with one shot. I am not an expert with a .32. I shot him twice.

His billfold had a little card in it that made him a deputy constable of a neighboring township. The name answered the "Jennie" angle. The name was: Luce Jenelli.

And that was what Mal Portman had meant. That answered the last question of who had forced him to check out of the Pilgrim Hotel.

I took my gun, my billfold and the things that were mine and picked up the wrapped package and moved down the alley, past the little fifteen watt bulb over the dim sign: CONSIDINE LOAN COMPANY, NIGHT BELL. The cop car turned into the alley as I left it from

the other end. Under a street light I tore away the wrappings.

The little mahogany music box was cold to my touch and when I lifted the lid, it didn't play a tinkling little tune. Or if it did, I wasn't listening.

I was looking at the beautiful engraving and the strange portrait on the bills. The five one thousand dollar bills taped to the inside of the lid . . .

Room 1912 still smelled of rye whiskey.

Maxie Steck's body was gone and just the four of us were there.

A stray piece of glass crunched under Chief Lynch's foot as he swung and hit me again. My face was getting sore all over.

Sam Kincheloe just sat in his chair and snapped the snaps on his black gloves and looked at the music box. Lynch hit me again.

"You dumb bunny," he wheezed. "You couldn't stay out of it. You knocked off the kid to get the pawn ticket and then came right back here to his room."

"I'm only going to tell you once more," I said. "You smack me again, and I'm going to signal Maness, out on the fire escape to blow a little hole in your belly with the shotgun."

Maness, the house dick, pushed the barrel of the cylinder bore twelve-gauge shotgun through the window and put a leg over the sill. "I've heard Barney's story, Lynch," he said. "I like it." Maness came into the room.

"Mal Portman robbed the Gillson Company safe," I said. "He took an envelope with five one thousand dollar bills in it, a bracelet and when it was discovered next morning, Gillson said nothing had been taken. I know all about that now. You and Sam Kincheloe have been covering up for Gillson."

Lynch looked at the shotgun. Some of the steam went out of him. "We were

covering for Frontenac, as much as for Gillson. Even you can see that, Barney, can't you?"

Chief Lynch belched and swallowed noisily.

"If Frontenac found out about Stella and Gillson, he would have blasted them both. The department would have had two murders on its hands."

"For the good of the force," I said. "That why you and the chief played it that way, Sam?"

Sam Kincheloe nodded.

I looked at him, and I said: "The lad who forced Portman to check out of the hotel—Luce Jenelli, a deputy constable—I gunned him out in an alley over on McGee Street just a little while ago."

SAM KINCHELOE said: "We can fix up some sort of story on that too, if it will keep the whole thing quiet."

"We don't really think you killed Maxie Steck," Lynch said. "Looks like a ruckus over a card game."

"If it all came out," I said, "we'd have to explain how Mal Portman gave the bracelet to Zelma Daley . . . How she threw it away when she found out it was stolen . . . How Sam turned it up in an old gold buyer's shop?"

"Yes, I guess we would, if it all came out," Lynch said hesitantly.

"And how Mal Portman, having been beaten up, was leary of what came next and how he passed the pawn ticket to Maxie Steck, in a couple of folded up ten dollar bills. And how Maxie, playing percentages, chumped me into a bet and lost the money to me so he wouldn't have the pawn ticket on him when he was questioned again."

Maness said: "You think the pawn ticket was what got you shot at by this 'Jennie' character?"

"It makes sense," I said. "Portman was to be beaten and run out of town so

that the five thousand bucks he got from the Gillson safe could be turned up. It wasn't on him, or he wouldn't have been allowed to live. Then, when he called me, asked me to pick him up here at the hotel, it must have been that the pawn ticket was right here—maybe it had been rolled up in the curtain down in Room 717."

"Then you figure he must have got the music box from the girl's room," Kincheloe said. "He put the money in it, hocked it and came to you."

"That's the only way it makes sense," I said. "The Daley girl reported it as stolen, to Maness. Maness mentioned that when we were here this afternoon, remember, Sam?"

Sam Kincheloe nodded.

He looked very carefully at Lynch. Lynch said: "Well, there's Gillson's money; Stella Frontenac has her bracelet; the district attorney is none the wiser and I guess that wraps up everything. Put that damn shotgun down, Maness, and we'll all have a drink and get a story ready for the papers."

I shook my head. Maness held the gun steady.

"What the hell else is there?" Kincheloe said petulantly.

"A matter of opinion," I said. "Everybody had an opinion on Mal Portman. The clerk said he was a nasty sort of a guy. Maness thought of him as just a man in Room 717. I was going to help him get straight. Lynch, you and Frontenac thought of him as a character who might embarrass the departments. Zelma Daley loved him."

I paused.

"Well, who else was there to have an opinion?" Lynch barked. He eyed the shotgun again and licked his lips.

"Maxie Steck thought he was a pretty good old guy. Those were his words. He said Portman wanted to make it right with him for hurting his feet. Portman

had said: 'You carried it down for the cops . . .' To Jenelli, he was just a guy to get beat up. All in a day's work."

I took the shotgun from Maness. "That leaves us a missing cop. Which will it be, gentlemen. You, Lynch, or Sam? I'm going to pay off for Portman, NOW!"

"You're getting awfully steamed up over Portman," Sam Kincheloe said. "All right, I'm the lad. I had a chance at a cut of the five grand if we turned it up. I helped Luce Jenelli push Mal Portman around."

"On his wedding day," I sneered. "Then you sent Jenelli for me. For the pawn ticket and the music box and the five grand."

"Wait a minute, Barney," Sam Kincheloe said. "We've got a stopping place. Let's stop there."

"Everybody had an opinion of Mal Portman but you, Sam."

The room got a little chilly quiet feel to it. Like a tomb, or the inside of a dry sewer.

"I don't get it," Kincheloe said.

"What was your opinion of him, Sam? Just exactly how did Mal Portman seem to you?"

"Why . . . I . . . Portman was . . ." Kincheloe looked hungrily at the music box again and the five bills. "Do I have to have an opinion?"

"Yeah," I said. "You do. At least you ought to if you're going to shoot a man to death. If it's going to be premeditated murder."

I almost had to trigger the old twelve-gauge then. Sam Kincheloe surged against the end of it. His eyes blazed. His hand started to his gun, then relaxed.

"Hell," he said. "You had me fooled for a minute."

"You were standing behind me," I said. "Portman went for his gun. He was going to surrender, remember, Sam?"

You were in the office. You came along. You had to rub Portman the way you did. You dropped back to light a cigarette, letting me get to Portman first. When Mal Portman saw you, he saw you going for your gun. Not for him, Sam. For me. You were going to let me have it in the back because you didn't know how much Portman had told me. Portman got killed because he was trying to save MY life, not his. You killed Maxie too, because he was a smart boy and couldn't see the percentage on holding out on you when you questioned him. Did he tell you he had passed the pawn ticket on to me, and just exactly what it was for?"

SAM KINCHELOE took a long look at the window. He shrugged and pulled off his gloves. "Well," he said, "I won't have to wear these things any more." He blew his breath on the skinned places on his knuckles. "It was worth a try," he said.

Lynch said: "I'm sorry, Sam." He put his big hand on Sam Kincheloe's arm. "I guess it's all out in the open now."

"Yes, I guess it is, chief. Portman was a chump."

Sam Kincheloe then threw his gloves in the chief's face and his hand raced for his own gun and he backed to the window. I had seen them come and go, the fast boys and the slow ones, like me.

My shotgun butt was on the floor. I had turned it over to the chief. Kincheloe made it to the window. He waited there, with one foot slung over the sill.

He smiled. "Toss the money to me, Barney." Sam Kincheloe held his gun steady. I had seen his speed before. I went over and got the money and tossed it to him.

Sam Kincheloe died of chronic greed. Chief Lynch sot him in the chest when

he took his eyes off the chief long enough to look directly at the money coming right at him.

He died with one foot still hanging over the sill.

Lynch said: "You can cover up only so many potatoes in a row."

I nodded my head. Chief Lynch had earned back some of what his stringing along with Kincheloe had cost him. "Let's get the boys over here and make a complete statement on the whole thing, unless there's something you want—for this . . ." Lynch looked at Kincheloe's body . . .

It was a quiet funeral. Both of them. They buried Sam Kincheloe first, in the morning. They buried Mal Portman later, in the afternoon. It was a nice funeral.

Not exactly like the Chicago boys and their flashy bronze jobs, but it was very nice.

Chief Lynch was there and Maness and I and Zelma Daley. Jerry Frontenac was there in his Homburg hat. He held it in his hand and looked down and I had a fleeting thought that some of him went into the hole with Portman's casket.

Stella Frontenac was there, hanging on Jerry's arm. She didn't cry. She didn't even wave at me, or bother to look up at me.

Lou Gillson did, though. He came over afterward and handed me the check for two thousand. I thanked him and put it in Zelma Daley's handbag where she would find it when she could see again.

I handed him the bill for two thousand, nine hundred seventy-five dollars from Passantino's Funeral Parlors and he nodded. As we turned to get in the black car going back to Midwest City, I saw him and the older Passantino brother looking at the statement.

Gillson said: "Will a check do?"

BIG-TIME OPERATOR

Police throw out city-wide dragnet for "Big-Time" Marty Konig after daring daylight kill.



Unknown slayer makes quick getaway after Hadley Building murder.

By

PAUL W. FAIRMAN

FRENCHY called me from the back room. I put the seven ball in the side pocket and won a dollar from Miggs. I put down my cue and collected the buck and went back there.

Frenchy owns the pool hall. He weighs

three fifty and has a special chair and has his meals sent in from next door. Spaghetti. Always spaghetti, four-five times a day. He's stayed in the pool room since he bought it. About three years.

He had a guy there. A little guy with

nothing much, but well dressed. He kept slapping a pair of gray gloves on his crossed knee. Slap—slap—slap. He put his eyes on me and kept them there.

Frenchy's big pan-face grinned a little. "You were saying you'd like a smell of the big time?"

It was a silly question. I didn't answer. Who doesn't want a smell of the big time?

"This is Marty Konig. He maybe has something for you."

I looked closer at Marty Konig. He kept slapping his gloves. I couldn't see any big time about him and I wondered. He looked like the kind of guy you could push around. The kind you watch in a tavern because maybe he'll stay late and get drunk and you can follow him out. I've made a little jack following drunks out of taverns. It's about all you can find in a town not any bigger than Baywood.

Frenchy's eyes kept going back and forth between Konig and me. His head was so big it was probably trouble to move so he made his eyes cover lots of territory. Frenchy rumbled, lazy: "He's O.K., Marty. The kid'll put a heap through the eye of a needle."

Konig said: "Can you do what you're told, kid?"

Maybe he *was* big time and I figured I shouldn't act like a dope. I gave him a scowl. "What's the caper?"

He got up and began pulling on his gloves. "For you it's a trip to the city and a hundred bucks—after you do what you're told."

He didn't ask if it was all right with me. I wondered how he knew that it was. He said: "We'll drive in. I'll pick you up here at 4 A. M. Get some sleep and be here."

He said: "O. K., Frenchy. See you," and he went out.

I asked Frenchy: "Who's the guy? What's his pitch?"

"For the big time, you ask too many questions. Tell Tony to bring me an order."

I went out and did it.

THE world's a hell of a place at 4 A. M. Whether it's cold or not you shiver. You yawn and your stomach feels rotten and you think, nuts to it.

But I made it and Frenchy was up, sitting in his chair. There was a bed in the back room but I don't think he used it. Or ever undressed.

Marty Konig came in. He was carrying the gloves and there was no sleep in his eyes. He looked like he didn't know it was four in the morning.

"You had breakfast?"

I hadn't but I said I had. I can't eat breakfast.

"O.K., let's hit it. See you, Frenchy."

He had a black '42 Buick and I drove. He sat beside me with his hands in his topcoat pockets. He looked straight ahead, and I began feeling something about him.

I don't quite know how it is, but sometimes in the back of your mind you get funny flashes of pictures. I saw one of these pictures of Konig, sitting there beside him, driving.

There was a heavy steel door and Konig walked up to it and pushed and the door bent in the middle and I could see the splinters of steel where it broke in the middle. He went on through it and there was a brick wall. He put a hand against the bricks and the wall came down. The bricks fell on him as he walked through but they didn't hurt him. He kept on walking, straight ahead.

"How old are you, kid?"

"Twenty-two."

Then he began asking all the questions I knew he'd asked Frenchy and had gotten answers to.

"How do you make your jack?"

"I bum from my dad and I pick up

dough shooting pool if I hook a sucker. And Frenchy'll buy anything I lift but with him I got to hold it a month. Then, if there's no heat, Frenchy'll buy it."

I wanted to ask him how he made his jack, but I didn't.

"Done any time?"

"Six months in the boys' school. Then I got paroled to Frenchy. He's got political connections."

After a minute he said: "Maybe you talk too much."

It scared me—him just saying it. I asked why.

"If Frenchy's got tie-ins, that's his business. Why sound off about it?"

"I didn't think I was sounding off."

"You can sound off in one word and send a guy away. Remember that. Always remember you can never say too little."

The sun began coming up. The world looked better. The road was wide and clean. I touched a little hard on the gas and the crate almost jumped out from under us. It was no ordinary '42 Buick.

I said: "Hey! Sorry. Why didn't you tell me?"

"If you're any good you'd have done it anyway—just to find out for yourself. She'll do a hundred and fifty. Eighty-five in second. Where'd you learn to drive?"

"I drove a cab nights for six months until they took it away from me."

"You drove a cab nights. That's enough. I didn't ask why you quit."

In some ways he was a funny guy but not in a way to laugh about. Not funny that way. What you could see of him from what he said was kind of scary.

It got hot after a while. Even with the breeze from moving, it was hot, but he didn't take off his coat. We were hitting the suburbs of the city when he said: "What's your idea of the big time, kid?"

I thought a little. "Oh, having the

jack you need, I guess. And classy dames. Making the cops sit up and take notice when they hear your name."

"Who would you consider a big time guy?"

"Well—there was Capone . . . Dillinger . . . Pretty Boy Floyd . . ."

"I get it. Your idea of being hot stuff is to be dead."

"Huh? Why?"

"They're all dead."

"But—"

"You're a damn fool. Maybe I made a mistake."

He didn't say anything more except: "Turn here—go up this street. Stop in front of that hotel."

I parked and we went into the hotel and he registered us. I didn't see what he wrote and on the way up in the elevator, I wondered what names he'd used.

In the room he took off his topcoat and looked at his wrist watch. It was gold with some diamonds. The McCoy. He said: "It's ten-thirty. You get some sleep because I want you fresh. I've got some checking to do. I'll be back by two at the latest."

He threw a five dollar bill on the bed. "Have them send up some grub and don't stick your nose out of this room."

AFTER he left I called downstairs. They sent up a bellhop with the menu and I ordered and they brought up the food on a little wagon. It was swell. The real class. I decided that was the way I wanted to live, where you could order punks around and get service.

After that I went to sleep. The bed was like a cloud.

He woke me up pulling at my shoulder. He said: "Get conscious. There's cold water in the bathroom." Then he waited until I was toweling my face.

"There may not be much to this," he said, "but then again, there might. We'll

go over the trip once so you'll have the lay. Then it's the business."

We went downstairs into the Buick.

"Go over two blocks left and hit the boulevard. Keep going south and take it easy. We've got plenty of time."

I used up an hour crossing the city. When he said, "Pull up in front of that building," we were ten miles from the hotel.

He looked at his watch. "We've got half an hour. Take a good look at this place and drive down the street."

I did—wondering. Two blocks down we hit a stop light. "Two blocks," he said. "Remember that. A block further on you hit the left lane and you can swing to the Outer Drive. That's if there's no trouble."

"If there's no trouble."

"If our luck breaks—then it's different. Then it's up to you to show me you can drive. Come trouble, we get away from here—understand?"

I nodded. My hands were cold. "What kind of trouble can there be?"

"The worst. Swing around and go back to that building and park at the curb. I'll get out and I'll be over by the entrance. I've got some business with a guy who'll come out." He looked at his watch.

I didn't know I was driving a car. It seemed to go around the corner and back down the block, and there we were—in front of the Hadley building.

Marty Konig got out and strolled over to the swinging doors. He stood there looking into the corner drugstore window, while people went by and in and out of the building. Marty's hands were in his topcoat pockets. I watched him while the motor hummed up the wheel and into my arms. I watched him, but still I didn't see quite how it happened.

When the right man came out through one of the swinging doors, Marty eased himself into the moving people, behind

the man. Then there were two explosions that could have been anything. They could have come from a truck. But the man jerked and coughed and went down to his knees. I saw his face as he went down. There was a funny expression on it. An expression like you'd have if you met someone you were scared of and weren't expecting. Then he was on his face down against the pavement.

Marty jumped back away from him just the same way everybody else did. People stopped and milled around. They moved back from the man and then surged forward, like water filling a hole.

I waited. I fought an urge to drive the heap away from there. A cop came running across the street. Then I saw Marty. He moved around until he was in line with the cop. Then he grabbed the cop's arm and pointed into the crowd, yelling something. The cop scowled and dived into the mob.

Marty stuck a cigarette in his mouth and got into the car.

I pulled away from the curb. Two blocks down the stop light caught me. Marty said: "Relax." The light changed. About three minutes later we were rolling down the Outer Drive.

No trouble. No trouble at all.

A little further on, Marty said: "Swing off next corner and go west three blocks. Stop in front of a red neon beer sign. I've got to collect."

I sat in front of the tavern, waiting for him. Then he came out. We headed for Baywood.

About twenty miles from the city, Marty turned his head and looked at me. He said: "Well, you're in the big time now, kid." He had thin lips. They said it. He had a face without mercy and hard gray eyes. His face and eyes said it too. *You're in the big time, kid.*

I shivered. I wondered what the man had done to get killed that way.

I didn't ask.

CAN YOU TAKE THE WITNESS?

Or Can He Take You?

By JULIUS LONG



1

You are a district attorney prosecuting Heber James for armed robbery. After you have presented all your evidence, the defense lawyer moves for a directed verdict of not guilty, arguing: "The district attorney has not only failed to prove venue, he has failed to prove that Heber James was anywhere near this county at the time of the alleged crime. Accordingly, he has failed to establish a *prima facie* case, and James should go free."

While the judge is making up his mind as to what he is going to do about James, can you tell us what a *prima facie* case is?

2

You are the district attorney of your county and permitted by law to take civil cases in addition to your duty to prosecute criminal cases. John walks into your office and says: "I've just been slugged by Sam! I want him arrested for assault and battery, and I want to sue him for damages!" You proceed according to the

wishes of John; you file charges against Sam for assault and battery, and you sue him for damages on behalf of your client. Which case is a criminal case and which is a civil case, and what is the difference?

3

You are a district attorney in a state permitting you a civil practice on the side along with your official duties. Joe Miller walks into your office and tosses a thousand dollar bill onto your desk. "I want you to handle a real estate deal for me," says Joe. "I hope the grand will cover the attorney fees."

As district attorney can you ethically accept the thousand dollar fee from Joe Miller whom you know to be the operator of a gambling joint and a marijuana syndicate?

4

You are a district attorney prosecuting Steve Carr on a charge of stealing geraniums. Carr's lawyer can't find any witnesses willing to testify to his client's

good character, but you can find dozens willing to commit themselves as to his bad character, Carr being practically the most unpopular guy in town. So you start to introduce your witnesses as to his bad character, and his lawyer objects. Will the judge sustain his objection or will you be allowed to trot out your character witnesses?

5

You are defense counsel for Jake Flynnsky, the noted bookie. On your client's behalf, you attempt to introduce an affidavit from his minister confirming his good character, also a petition signed by fifty of his clients to the effect that he is a good bookie as well. The D.A. objects to the introduction of both the affidavit and the petition, which has not been sworn to. Which will the judge declare to be admissible as evidence—the affidavit or the petition?

6

The art of cross-examination has many subtle ramifications, but there are a few old stand-bys that get amazing results. For example, you represent the plaintiff in an automobile accident case. Your client's story is that he saw the defendant's car approaching beyond a railroad crossing, that the car bounced over the crossing at such a high speed that it was out of control and eventually swerved into him. In the meantime, sensing danger, he had stopped his car on the right side of the road. You begin cross-examination of the defendant, hoping to get him to admit three things: (1) he bounded across the railroad track and swerved; (2) his car was out of control, (3) your client's car was already stopped when it was struck. Should you ask any of the following questions when you cross-examine the defendant:

1) Didn't your car bound across the railroad track and swerve into my client's car?

2) Isn't it a fact that your car was out of control when you hit the railroad track?

3) How long had my client's car been stopped before you first noticed it?

Answers to Preceding Questions

1

A *prima facie* case is the presentation of sufficient evidence to establish the guilt of an accused man in the absence of any defense evidence to the contrary. Of course the term is applicable in civil cases also. If you, the district attorney, did not prove venue, then the judge would be justified in directing a verdict of acquittal, for you failed to prove one of the essential elements of a *prima facie* criminal case.

An interesting use of this term is its incorporation in the speed laws of many states. Having been nailed by highway patrolmen in at least a third of the states of the union, I have got off with a warning merely by uttering the magic words, *prima facie*. When a patrolman snaps: "Don't you know the speed limit in this state is fifty miles an hour?" he is usually stretching the truth. Speed laws usually state that driving in excess of a certain speed, such as fifty miles an hour, is *prima facie* evidence of excessive speed. A *prima facie* case that you have violated the speed laws is therefore made out on proof that you have traveled at a speed in excess of fifty miles an hour. But this *prima facie* case may always be rebutted by proof that under the circumstances your speed was not excessive. However, a little knowledge is often dangerous; don't get too cute the next time a highway patrolman stops you.

2

The prosecution of Sam for assault and battery is a criminal case; the suit for damages against him is a civil case. The difference between a civil and a criminal case is that the former is a matter of private concern between the individuals involved, while the latter involves a public wrong, a wrong against society. A private wrong may take place in the commission of a public wrong, hence a civil case, or tort action, arises when this happens. The public prosecutor—that is, the district attorney—is obligated by the duties of his office to prosecute the doers of public wrongs, but it is up to the in-

dividual employing him to pay his fee for filing and trying a civil suit arising from that public wrong.

Falling between criminal and civil cases are quasi-criminal cases such as bastardy proceedings.

3

No, of course not, but the odds are that you will pick up the grand, promising yourself that in no way will the acceptance of this ridiculous fee influence you in your official attitude toward Joe Miller. State laws permitting county attorneys (prosecuting attorneys or district attorneys) to engage in private practice are a crying shame suffered to exist because the taxpayers are told that they save them money. A prosecuting attorney's salary in such a state is so low that he could not possibly make a living from the salary alone; therefore he must engage in civil practice. Any such county attorney telling the truth about why he sought election for such job will admit that he expected his official position to bolster his law practice. As soon as a lawyer is elected prosecuting attorney, many people regard him as the "official lawyer" and feel that having such an important official on their side is half the battle in their private litigation. Time after time grand juries have failed to indict persons actually represented by the prosecuting attorney entrusted with procuring indictments. Persons operating businesses of a dubious nature invariably attempt to retain the prosecuting attorney, who can charge fees all out of proportion to the legitimate services rendered, well aware that such fees are actually a bribe. Until all prosecuting attorneys are barred from civil practice and paid a salary commensurate with the duties of their office, taxpayers shall continue to bear the burden of a penny-wise policy that encourages corruption.

4

Yes, the judge will sustain Steve's lawyer's objection; you cannot introduce witnesses as to his bad character until his lawyer has presented witnesses as to

his good character, thus opening the door for rebuttal. However, you may attempt to impeach Carr as a witness; that is, you may attack his credibility as a witness whether character evidence has been offered or not.

5

Neither; both the affidavit and the petition are inadmissible as evidence of Flynnsky's good character. Every lawyer is accustomed to having clients shower him with affidavits, letters, statements, etc. which will "make good evidence." The reason bare affidavits and statements cannot be introduced in evidence is that the adverse party has no opportunity to cross-examine the person signing the affidavit or the statement. If a witness is out of the state or too ill to appear in court, his statement may be taken by deposition, but in that case the adverse party is given due notice so that he may appear and cross-examine the witness.

6

Question No. 3 is the only one worded to ring the bell. The question takes for granted the fact that your client's car was stopped; the defendant is merely asked how long it was stopped before he first noticed it. Of course he cannot know the answer to that, which causes him to snap back: "How would I know how long it was stopped—it was stopped when I first saw it!"

Question No. 1 should be worded as follows: "Which way did you swerve when you bounded over the railroad track?"

Answer: "To the left, but I pulled the wheel right back!"

Question No. 2 should be worded as follows: "How long did it take you to get your car back under control after you bounded over the track?"

Answer: "Oh, I got it back under control right away!"

In case any skeptic doubts that these "loaded" questions would draw such answers, be advised that the situation described is an actual one and that the questions and answers are from the record of the cross-examination.



LIFTING THE SEPTEMBER BLACK MASK



DANIEL MORGAN *and Associates, Private Investigators*—that's what the flaking gold paint on the dirty glass door announced sullenly, and I was the "associates." At least I was until the night the bartender at the Clover Club laughed when he filled my glass and said, "Larry, you been won," and I learned that Morgan, my boss, had lost me in a poker game to Fat Joe Johnson, as low a form of human organism as ever dipped his greasy fingers in the grab bag of dirty politics, blackmail and murder. We had only one case working at the time—the Layten kill—and there didn't seem to be the kind of dough in it that'd interest my new lord and master but I didn't know Fat Joe. That guy could put the squeeze on an Egyptian mummy and come up with a scheme for lining his pockets with gilt—and there I was with an iron-bound contract that forced me to aid and abet him!

A CORPSE CAN'T RUN

By D. L. CHAMPION

brings back a top-flight crime-fictioneer who's been absent from these pages far too long, to introduce as original a cast of murdered-minded citizenry as you'll encounter in many a gibbous moon. A smashing new novelette—complete in our next issue.



He was a small, chubby man, bald except for cottony tufts above the ears, and he looked to be a meek and inoffensive character. But appearances are misleading. Actually he was Louie "Cotton" Gunder—with a dozen big heists and half as many killings chalked against him. Which is why Sam Terry was so wary as he sidled up to the bed where the little man lay waiting. Then, suddenly, Terry knew that waiting was all Cotton would ever do again—for you can't heist or kill with a lead slug between your eyes. And Terry knew, too, that he'd walked in on the sweetest homicide-frame ever bolted together. That idea hit him the minute he recognized his own gun lying there on the floor and heard the beat-copper's voice in the doorway say, "I thought the call said just a disturbance. Some disturbance!"

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POWDERSMOKE AT 221B BAKER ST.

By John Stanley

(Star of "Sherlock Holmes," Mutual Broadcasting System)

TO THE casual Sherlock Holmes fan, the association of firearms with the famous detective is limited to the "Service Revolver" used by Dr. Watson. In fact, the general opinion seems to be that Holmes was a poor pistol shot, having practically no knowledge of the subject. But, a careful study of his activities reveals that Holmes had more than just an incidental interest in shooting.

First of all, in his younger days, no doubt while still in college, Sherlock Holmes most certainly served a hitch in the ranks of the British Army—evidently in the Yorkshire Territorials.

There is positive evidence that during 1879 (Holmes was born in 1854 and would have been 25 at the time), there was a Corporal Holmes enrolled in the 19th North Yorkshires—an expert rifleman who won many shooting events.

It is a well known fact that a fine pistol shot will invariably do well with the rifle. On the other hand, it does not follow that the expert with the rifle will do well with the pistol. Assuming that Holmes *was* an expert rifleman, other circumstances indicate that his first love was for the pistol, and we shall shortly see he was an expert with this weapon.

Let's take a close look at a bit of Sherlock Holmes' pistol shooting.

In the story "The Musgrave Ritual," Dr. Watson says: "I have always held that pistol practice should be distinctly an open-air pastime; and when Holmes, in one of his queer humours, would sit in an armchair with his hair-trigger and a hundred Boxer cartridges and proceed to adorn the opposite wall with a patriotic

V.R. done in bullet pocks, I felt strongly that neither the atmosphere nor the appearance of our room was improved by it."

In an analysis of this paragraph, we find that "hair-trigger" refers to a pistol having a very light trigger pull. This would be the result of expert work on the sear mechanism of the piece or of a "set" trigger. A weapon having the "set" trigger generally may be fired with a normal pull of three to four pounds, or, at the will of the shooter, may be mechanically "set" to have a pull that may be so light that it can be activated by blowing on it with the breath.

Such a firearm would not usually be found in the hands of a novice.

The "Boxer cartridges" used by the great detective may lead some readers to believe that they were of great power—in fact, with too much zip for indoor use. This is no doubt due to the fact that the famed and quite powerful "Boxer-Henry" cartridge was previously used in the British service rifle and has been quite well known.

But, as a matter of fact, the term "Boxer cartridge" was loosely used in Great Britain to indicate any type of centerfire ammunition.

Strictly speaking, the word "Boxer" is used to identify a certain kind of primer where the anvil is actually a part of the primer, as used today in all American centerfire ammunition.

Where this primer is employed, it is very easy to reload cartridges, and Sherlock Holmes may have and probably did make up some "pipsqueak" (low power) loads for indoor practice.

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As for the actual shooting mentioned by Dr. Watson, it would be almost impossible for a poor shot to inscribe the script V.R. (with crown) with any degree of perfection for pistol fire, no matter what the distance.

Of course, Dr. Watson was probably somewhat better than Holmes with the pistol. He was a natural. His eyesight was extraordinarily keen, and his training as a surgeon would develop perfect coordination between the hand and the brain which is so necessary in good pistol shooting.

The arsenal at the Holmes-Watson diggings at 221B Baker Street was quite comprehensive.

Dr. Watson's first service revolver may have been the old Adams, caliber .450, but I cannot help but believe that his favorite was the Webley, Mark 11 W. G. (Webley Government), which was adopted as the British Service Revolver in 1889. This weapon had the Webley stirrup type breech lock, the strongest hinged frame locking system ever devised. This locking system has been used ever since by the British.

Another of Watson's revolvers may have been the Webley small caliber pocket weapon. Or it may have been a revolver chambered for the old rimfire .31 caliber Eley, dish based, a very poor cartridge.

Sherlock Holmes' personal gun was the .455 Webley Revolver, with a 2¼" barrel. A fine weapon—it was the .257 Magnum of its day—is still used by the Royal Irish Constabulary with minor modifications.

Other weapons in the Holmes-Watson arsenal consisted of continental target pistols, a variety of pieces taken from criminals, cane guns, etc.

Yes, it is my opinion that Sherlock Holmes was one of the world's most famous and well-informed gun fans!

THE END

(Continued from page 43)

be too. She knocked off Leon Harwood. I know, because when he died, Kit was on the stage finishing the last act. And Harwood was scared stiff of her. He had an idea she was behind the blackmail scheme. So did I. Shows you how wrong a smart guy can be. Rose went to Harwood's home and he let her in. The whole place was locked up like a vault. I couldn't get in without committing burglary. All I did was look through the window. Harwood would have trusted Rose. It's those damn glasses with the ribbon. They're as good a prop in real life as in the movies. He'd have been afraid to let Kit in and very distrustful of a stranger. But not of an efficient secretary who might give him the low-down on Kit.

"But Harwood made a mistake in confiding everything to Rose. He told her he'd employed me, that he was going to pay, but afterwards I'd heat up some sort of a trail. She sent three punks to get me. That stickup wasn't aimed at Kit, but at me. Only I saw it coming and got set. I plugged your pal, but he wasn't dying. I took him here for questioning and Rose knew he had to die. He was dead when Kit relieved Rose, but Kit wouldn't know a dead person from a drunken stiff. She didn't travel in our kind of society, Mack."

"He's lying, Mack," Rose said in a deadly voice.

"He's telling the truth," I argued. "Why would I kill him? Or Kit for that matter? We needed him to get the truth. Rose couldn't afford to have a half-sick, half-delirious man talking his head off. So she made certain he wouldn't."

Mack made up his so-called mind. "It don't make any difference. You got to get plugged anyhow."

He backed away and I braced myself. This looked very much like the end of a

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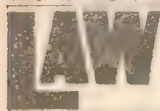
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nice private detective agency. It never paid off much, but I liked the work. Not this part though. I was watching Kit. Rose was watching me. The guy on the divan was still yowling and watching nobody. I gave my head a very small nod and Kit threw back her head and emitted the wildest yell I'd ever heard. It dinned like a fire siren at close range. It made Mack turn. It would have made a wooden Indian turn.

And I had him. Low, with my right arm dragging down his gun hand. I don't claim to be a gent. I sank my teeth into his wrist as far as they'd go and the gun dropped. Rose fired about that time. The slug smacked Mack through the thigh and he went sprawling. I scooped up his gun, jerked it into position and Rose made a dive for the door.

I planted one slug an inch from her right ear, another half an inch from her left and a third that must have burned some of that tightly coiled hair on top of her head. That did it. I had her cuffed to Mack by the time Kit started yelling into the phone.

"You ought to take more interest in your boss's plays," I chided Rose. "In the middle of the second act she yells her head off."

"B-but not as loud as I screamed here," Kit shuddered. "I knew what you meant when you nodded, Stacy. You realized I was going to scream anyway and I might as well do it up right. That was not acting."

After they took Rose and the others away and I'd pacified the homicide lieutenant by letting him take full credit for the job, I put on my hat. Kit put her arms around me and kissed me on the chin. I didn't kiss her back. I'm too old for that. So is she for that matter. If she'd been about twenty—well, who knows?

THE END

(Continued from page 55)

The cabbie turned, and I gave him the address of my apartment.

The whole set-up . . . Leedom City . . . No mustache . . . It wouldn't be the regular route to Leedom City, and it would be almost as short, maybe quicker.

I could tell. His face was no mask, I knew. It had cost him money, that face, in many a poker session.

The cab stopped, and I paid the cabbie. It was still chill, out, but there was little breeze, and the air seemed dry enough. I walked up the single flight of stairs to the apartment.

Ned was there, near the window.

"I got Girard for our boy," he said. "Fifteen thousand or thirty percent, whichever's bigger."

I didn't answer that. I said: "You shouldn't let other people use your car, Ned."

His guilt couldn't have been any plainer if it had been written on his suddenly rigid face. "I—don't get you, Cary. . . ."

"That cop, that Ruxtell," I went on, "would nail anybody who drove too fast past that hiding place of his, would he? you were sure of a pinch. Dark and no moon, and one big guy looks about like another, in the dark. If he's got a mustache, he can always shave it off, can't he?"

No words for seconds, from him. Fear in his face, and sudden understanding. "What—are you trying to—"

"The Mill Road is one way to get to Leedom City," I continued, "and that's what gave me the hunch. Regan drove your car, and when the cop stopped him, he gave your name, just as you two had planned. That established your alibi. Then Regan drove on to Rainbow Cabin, and that established his alibi. Two alibis with one man, which left you free—free to kill Carol."

He rose. "Are you crazy, Cary? What

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in hell would I want to kill her for?"

"Because she knew about the tie-up between you and Regan. She knew the whole set-up. Knowing about Regan wouldn't cause her death. But you were closer to me. In case something should happen to me, you'd get the business, probably; you knew all about it. That was all right, as long as I was just dating her. But when she realized I planned marriage, she began to worry about her stake in my business. And that's when you had to kill her."

"Cary," he said hoarsely, "in the name of . . . You're not making sense—Regan, sure, but not . . ."

"Regan's already talked," I lied, "and that cop, that Ruxtell, says the guy he stopped looked a lot like Regan and not at all like you. Regan was wearing gloves, and you *never* wear gloves, Ned."

All lies, but maybe one of them would score, maybe one of them would hit.

Again, he took a breath, and his eyes went past me toward the door. He said: "Regan's idea—it—"

I hit him with a haymaker right. Not on the button; it landed high on the jaw, but he went back into the wall.

I came in, and his knee came up to hit me where it would do the most damage. I tried another right hand for the jaw as nausea charged through me.

It was a button shot this time, and he sagged. I was still hitting as he fell.

Ned talked after Maltz spent a few hours with him, and it was the way I'd called it. Ruxtell identified Regan, though how sure he was about it, I don't know. It was enough to put Regan away for a long, long time, though he beat the chair. Ned didn't.

I see Alice quite often. She and I have seen the Giants play all fall, and we root for them, occasionally. But our first love, of course, is the Bears. That, and some other things we have in common.

THE END

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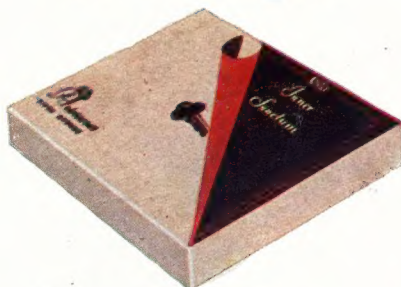
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